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STRETTON OF RINGWOOD CHACE.

A NOVEL.

"There is a Power above which shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them as we may."—SHAKESPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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STRETTON OF RINGWOOD CHACE.

CHAPTER I.

ON a bright summer morning, Edward and Clara Stretton, accompanied by a pretty little girl, were strolling through the small village of Ringwood, enquiring their way to the church. It stood quite within the park, one corner of which was literally cut off by the church-path.

The shadows of the trees flickered pleasantly on the low roof, as they approached the building; and the birds darted in and out of the ivy, with which it was nearly

covered. The season and the scene might well have tempted them to loiter ; but the brother and sister pressed forward, scarcely glancing around them, as if in no loitering mood.

Entering the open door, they looked eagerly and curiously around. The church was very small and very old ; open benches filled up the whole sitting space, except one snugly-enclosed *room* under the north wall—the Stretton pew. The large window immediately above it was darkened with the outside ivy, and curiously speckled with shields and lozenges of coloured glass, each commemorating some marriage in the family.

In the dusky corner behind the pew, was a large altar-tomb.

—“ In memory of Margery, the beloved wife of Arthur Stretton, of Ringwood Chase, Esq., died——

“ Also of Lady Harriet, second wife of the above, and daughter of ——”

"This will not help us, Edward," said his sister; "we must look at the older monuments."

They walked slowly round the interior of the church, examining the tablets with which the walls were encrusted; noting down inscriptions, copying lists of sons and daughters, &c. The tablets sometimes gave, not merely the names, but a condensed history of those interred below the pavement.

"What a large family that Richard Stretton had!" exclaimed Edward, stopping in the midst of an inscription which he was copying. "Twin sons, to begin with!—Ancestors enough for a dozen stray branches!"

"And our own shield over the tablet!" said Clara; "quarterings all exact;—no, not quite;—but depend on it, we branched off here."

They went on talking in suppressed tones, in which a sense of frolic and adventure contended with reverence for the place, and for

those who slept beneath ; till a slight noise startled them, and looking round, they saw workmen in the farthest corner of the church.

“ Why, it is the Stretton pew !” said Edward, moving quickly towards the spot.

“ Yes, sir,” said the workman whom he questioned,—“ poor Mr. Arthur, sir, is to be brought home to-night.—Drowned, sir, boating at Eton,” the man added, as Edward looked the questions he was too startled to ask. “ Do you know the family, sir ?—You look so pale.—Why, you are *like* them too !—Perhaps a relation ?”

“ No, no !” said Edward hurriedly ; then, half ashamed of the shock he had felt,—
—“ Why, Clara, Mabel is shivering all over ! Come out into the sun, you silly child !” and he dragged her through the porch.

Grave and silent, they again passed through the village ; in which, as they now observed, an unnatural stillness reigned. They had been before too intent on their object, to ob-

serve the subdued demeanour and saddened countenances of all whom they met; or the almost entire suspension of ordinary work. Able-bodied labourers stood in groups at the corners, talking eagerly in under-tones; women lounged at their doors, catching a word from every passer-by; even the children seemed afraid to play, and held on timidly to their mothers' aprons.

Ringwood village was not at all like a primitive, picturesque village "in a book;" still less did it resemble the model settlement of some wealthy and benevolent proprietor in the present day. It was scattered, straggling, and decent, with few points of peculiar interest. It possessed, assuredly, most of the characteristics of a village proper. It had its two or three public-houses, tolerably orderly; but where men did undeniably smoke and drink; every now and then get tipsy, and, consequently, "fall out, and chide and fight." It had its lock-up; certainly not kept in very

available repair ; its pair of stocks—sufficiently moss-grown and dilapidated to induce a hope that they were seldom in actual use, and were suffered to remain rather as a warning than for their more obvious purpose. It had its large pond, for ducks and geese to paddle in during summer, and for men and boys to skate on, and get themselves quite, or nearly, drowned in, every winter. It had its snug, thick-walled almshouses (built by some Stretton immemorial), nestling under the shadow of the churchyard elms ; its long, low-browed vicarage, running along the village street, and only separated from it by a green fencing, which almost touched the parlour windows ; and yet as inaccessible to vulgar curiosity or intrusion as its kindly, but reserved occupant. There were the mossy oak palings of the Chace, running for miles along the country-road, upon which, at long intervals, its three lodges kept watch and ward ; there was the grey old house itself, just discernible through

one fortunate opening in the trees, standing long and low upon its elevated platform, begirt with its amphitheatre of woods.

The village had evidently been, at no distant period, very poor—miserably neglected. All needful repairs had now been carried out, with an obvious and scrupulous regard to the comfort and well-being of the inhabitants, but without the slightest trace of dilettante taste for the picturesque. All that was not too far fallen into decay had been substantially and thoroughly renovated, with entire disregard of congruity ; all that was only fit for a sketch-book had been mercilessly pulled down, and replaced by new, common-place erections, in which use and durability alone had been considered.

Time, the great artist, would soon blend and soften all into one harmonious picture ; meanwhile, human nature was unconsciously doing its part. Of course, the men, like most Englishmen who work twelve hours a day for

a living, contrived to find an hour or two more, for filling some little side plot of ground with potatoes, stuffing the tiny front strip of garden with stocks, wall-flowers, and marigolds, planting a slip of rose or honeysuckle by the door ; the women, like most English-women who have a houseful of children, or a tribe of tiny brothers and sisters, to occupy their hands, managed to tend and water sundry geraniums and myrtles, in bright red pots, on the window-sill, and to patronize a blackbird or thrush, in wicker cage festooned with groundsel ; the children, like most village children of those primitive days, whose serious avocations were confined to attending the dame-school, and running errands for their mothers, had motley and grotesque pets of their own : kittens and puppies, a lame duck, or waddling orphan pig. Of course, also, these children were for the most part chubby and rosy, and boasted curly hair of all shades, from sun-bleached white, through every modi-

fication of brown, golden, red, and auburn. Of course, among these Englishwomen, the great majority had fresh, wholesome complexions, and clear, honest, straightforward-looking eyes ; their very comeliness rendered more picturesque by the equally characteristic national tendency, even in the younger and prettier, to postpone feminine coqueties to the practical business of the hour ; and to bustle about, regardless for the moment whether the movements were graceful, or the dress deranged by exertion ; resuming the consciousness of good looks, and all thereunto belonging, the moment the pressure of actual urgent business subsided into a few moments' breathing space.

But all these enlivening aspects of the village were now nearly overshadowed by the cloud of gloom and awe that hung over the place. The brother and sister felt as if they could scarcely venture to speculate upon subjects of personal interest, in the presence of

that general sorrow. They were really relieved, when they again approached the little village inn, where Mr. Stretton, with his son and daughter, had taken up their quarters for the few hours they proposed to pass at Ringwood.

A "little village inn" it might now correctly be styled. A small, square-fronted house, of warm-coloured brick, softened by time into a mellow tint, which harmonized well with the broad green leaves and twisted brown stem of the great vine by which it was more than half covered. A rambling garden behind occupied the open space, once a large courtyard, around which the stables and outbuildings had formerly straggled. All such pretentious appurtenances had long since been pulled down, the materials sold for rubbish, and the plot of ground well stocked with cabbages and fruit trees, to supply the table of the family themselves, and the very few guests, above the rank of villagers, who now ho-

noured the "Stretton Arms" with their presence.

For the days were gone by when the patronage of "The Chace" was of itself a fortune ; when the rambling old mansion constantly overflowed with guests, whose servants not unfrequently had to be quartered in the village ; nay, when even the latest comers of the visitors themselves did not disdain the hospitable inn, which seemed but a detached appendage to the "great house." Those were the days of hurried orders for post-horses, when "quality" from all the country round were coming and going perpetually—of jovial hunting-dinners and convivial suppers, got up for the occasional enjoyment of a merriment too boisterous even for the free-and-easy ways of the old Stretton dynasty. Then four smoking horses were no unusual sight at that door ; hoops rustled up the creaking staircase. Now an excitement was created in the humble little hostelry even by Mr. Stretton's carriage, re-

markable only for its extreme plainness—by the quiet travelling dress of his daughter—by the unpretending order for “luncheon.” And the brother and sister, as they re-entered, were followed by curious and deferential glances, which they were too much pre-occupied to observe.

In the inn parlour Edward and Clara found their father, still occupied, as they had left him, with a newspaper. He had, however, during their absence, learnt from the landlord the recent event; and was, when they returned, intently perusing its details in the county paper, which had just been brought him. Edward and Clara had impatiently started on their exploring expedition within five minutes after the carriage had driven up to the inn, so they had heard nothing of what had occurred, until they learnt it from the workpeople in the church.

Mr. Stretton was called by many a rich *merchant*. Any one, however, who chanced to

use the expression in his presence was inevitably cut short with a testy "*Tradesman!*"—which was in his case the literally correct appellation. He was justly satisfied with his own position; and never troubled himself to inquire why the coat of arms, which he had inherited from his father (but never used), was nearly identical with that of his namesakes, the Strettons of Ringwood Chace.

But Clara and Edward had dreamed dreams on the subject from childhood. No feeling of discontent, however—scarcely any of ambition—mingled in the vague romance with which they yearned towards the beautiful old Chace. They longed for it rather as for an old family home.

A visit to it had long been their favourite vision; and this summer, having achieved their annual feat of persuading their father into a few weeks' excursion, they had little additional difficulty in inducing him, on the way, to stop for a few hours at Ringwood.

They might catch, perhaps, a distant glimpse of the old house, which bore their own shield blazoned over its rugged porch. They would at least visit the church, where slept those whom they persisted in believing to be their ancestors.

A certain shy pride, however, on the part of the whole family, made them shrink from the very appearance of claiming kindred where it could not be proved, and was not likely to be welcome. On this visit to Ringwood village, they had, therefore, taken all possible precautions to prevent their name from being known. They had even, on the plea of securing accommodation, sent forward the carriage and servants direct to the place where they proposed to sleep; and bespoken from the landlord of the "Stretton Arms" a carriage to take them on thither themselves, when they should have accomplished their day's object.

But all thoughts of further exploring were now wholly checked. Edward and Clara, their

mirth of the morning entirely subdued, related to their father, in suppressed tones, the shock which had interrupted their examination of the church; and heard from him the more minute particulars with which he had meantime become acquainted.

“And who is the next heir?” said Mr. Stretton at length.

The notion had not occurred to them; and they were wholly ignorant of the recent history of the “Ringwood Strettons.”

“Edward might be, perhaps, if we only knew who was our great-grandfather,” said Clara at last.

“You are happier as you are,” said Mr. Stretton.

“Oh! we are happy enough,” said Clara; “still it *is* ridiculous not to know who was one’s great-grandfather.”

Edward laughed. “Well, I only hope the old place will go to some one who knows how to value it. One wouldn’t grudge him Ring-

wood, if he does honour to the name of Stretton."

"Think, father," said Clara, "our own very arms over the door! But it is too bad to *have* such, and not use them! *Do*, papa, let us have them on the new carriage!"

"I will have nothing of the sort!" said Mr. Stretton, angrily. "They are not fit," he added, more mildly, "for a man in business."

Clara coloured crimson, and pressed her lips tight. Then, by a forcible effort, she changed the subject.

"Had we not better leave directly after luncheon? It would not be pleasant to remain in the neighbourhood."

"Oh, no! not on any account!" exclaimed Edward, earnestly. "I may ring, may I not, father, and give orders about our starting as early as possible?"

Mr. Stretton quietly assented, and the necessary orders were accordingly given.

The landlord was, of course, still full of the

mournful topic of the day. When he next entered the room, he addressed himself to Edward, to whom he had before had no opportunity of speaking.

“A sad day for Ringwood, sir,” he began. “Such a fine, high-spirited young gentleman, too! And now there’s no knowing whom the old place may go to.”

“Is Mrs. Stretton the last of her family?” said Mr. Stretton.

“Why, sir, there was a sister, who married away to some nobody like. We don’t know much about her; the two young ladies left the place, you know, sir, when the old Squire died; and before Mrs. Stretton comed back, the other had been married no end of time. But you see, sir, there’s nobody now to take to the place, but her or her children, if so be she has any.”

“The property seems well cared for,” said Mr. Stretton. “Mrs. Stretton must have a good steward.”

“ Sees to all herself, sir ; steward, and keepers, and every bit of a gardener, sir, must obey a bend of her little finger. But a good mistress, sir, and a real lady, only a bit short and quick ; knows her own mind, and speaks it clear out, and sticks to it. Sees to the tenants, too, every one of them, and the poor especial. But I’m afeard she’ll care for nothing now that Master Arthur is gone. It was easy to see how she boasted herself in him, that all was to be his.” And he bustled out of the room.

“ Poor thing !” said Clara, looking up with a deep-drawn sigh, and an unusual softness in her face.

And she sat for some minutes, quiet and thoughtful, before she roused herself to prepare for starting. Her sympathies were quick and warm as her temper ; and, indeed, her little fits of irritation seldom lasted long. But she did not like to be debarred of her *rights* ; and a *right* she considered this untraced

Ringwood descent, which her father, with an equally characteristic pride of his own, persisted in ignoring or undervaluing.

They were obliged to hurry off, that they might reach the next stage by bed-time.

While they were driving out of the village, Mrs. Stretton was sitting motionless and rigid, all consciousness centred in the perception of one sound, the muffled tolling of the bells. Weeks elapsed before she awoke sufficiently from her stupor to ask herself the question, which had occurred immediately to others—*Who now was to inherit Ringwood?*

Ringwood Chace had been the pride of the Strettons ever since the Strettons were a family; need more be said of that ancient tenure? It was not entailed; the notion of alienation had never occurred as a possibility. Safely it was handed down, to these latter days as we call them; but not literally to *our* days. A Mr. Stretton of the last century, left a widower, married, as his second wife, a por-

tionless, extravagant woman of rank ; married, in point of fact, far *below*, not, as common parlance ran, *above* himself. She lived long enough to ruin him, but died young and childless. He survived her but a few months ; leaving, of all his promising family, only two daughters, the presumed co-heiresses of Ringwood.

They had known from childhood that the estate was embarrassed ; had seen reckless extravagance at home, while their brothers were sent, one by one, to pine and die at foreign stations, because foreign appointments were the only provision their father could make for them.

With Jane, the elder of the two surviving daughters, Ringwood became a passion. If she could not save her brothers, the old home of the Strettons she at least would save. At Mr. Stretton's death, his will directed that Ringwood should be at once sold, to pay his debts.

The two girls had each, from their mother, enough to keep them from absolute dependence; and some distant relations, in the same county, at once offered them a home.

The younger soon married; not discreditably, but quite out of their own "set;" and thenceforth "the county" knew her no more. The intercourse between the sisters became constrained, and gradually dropped.

Jane remained some years unmarried. She was too handsome and too proud for any one but a member of some "good county family" to pretend to; and too poor to suit the views of many in that class.

At length Colonel Ashgrove gravely and quietly proposed, and was answered as gravely and quietly.

"Do you admire the days of chivalry, Colonel Ashgrove? because I suspect that, much as we talk of their generosity and disinterestedness, some of their practices would be thought mean and ungenerous, if *avowedly*

repeated in the present day ; yet I mean to do so now."

He looked enquiringly.

" You know that in those days a fair lady often set a distinct price upon her hand ; the knight who fulfilled her desire, won her as his reward. Now, I can only love one who makes me happy ; so he who would win my love, must fulfil the wish in which my happiness is bound up."

" What is it, Jane ?" he asked, earnestly. (They had played together as children before his Indian service, so the Christian name came naturally.)

" He must become Stretton of Ringwood Chace, as the husband of Jane Stretton was always expected to become."

" I accept the condition," said Colonel Ashgrove, as quietly as before. " My brother James and his boys save me all responsibility as to our own place ; and it is, as you know, to India and bachelor uncles that I am indebted

for the fortune, which I would gladly employ to reclaim the dear old Chace. But then, Jane, I shall claim full and frank fulfilment on *your* part. You have promised, remember, to *love me*, if I restore you to your home."

The unaccustomed tears came into Jane's falcon eyes. "You shall not repent it," was all she said.

She kept her word. The coveted estate was not at once to be obtained; many difficulties and hindrances intervened. But she married Colonel Ashgrove at once; only stipulating that, until the purchase could be effected, they should reside abroad. She could have no English home, she said, but Ringwood.

It *was* her home before very long; and the heir of Ringwood Chace was born, as she had so ardently desired, in the home of his ancestors.

Yet when, some few years later, Colonel Stretton's health began to fail, not all her

cares for her promising boy could interfere with the wife's devoted attention to her husband ; and after his death, it was very long ere she could find consolation in the thought that Ringwood Chace was her own, to hold and to enjoy ; and that she had a hopeful son to whom to bequeath it.

CHAPTER II.

IN a few days the Strettons' excursion was to terminate. Besides Mr. Stretton's chronic impatience to be again in his counting-house, two rough school-boys were coming home for the vacation; and Mabel, whose holidays had begun earlier than theirs, was shortly to return to school. In both departments, Clara was indispensable.

Since her mother's death, she had been the manager and mainspring of the household. Edward, only a year younger than herself, had been her comrade on equal terms; but

“the boys,” when not at school, were still a constant plague and diversion to her ; and in Mabel she had voluntarily taken on herself an additional charge.

About five years before, Mr. Stretton and his family, in a tour through Wales, had become interested in the artist, Mr. Arleigh, in his delicate wife and two pretty children. Repeating the tour two years later, they learnt that his wife’s death had been quickly followed by his own ; and that the children were under the care of grand parents, respectable people, but too poor to educate them properly. Clara, then a school-girl herself, after much inward screwing up of her courage, petitioned her father that she might take Mabel back with *her* ; and was much relieved by the—“ If you like, my dear,”—which she received in answer. Thus Clara and Mabel were for a short time school-fellows ; and when Clara left, Mabel continued at the same school ; spending most of her

holidays with the Strettons. Among them she was much on the footing of a favourite little sister ; a good deal spoiled, and not a little teased. She was now about thirteen years old ; but much younger in appearance.

The Strettons resided within driving distance of the Metropolis—(as yet, railways were not)—but beyond all taint of its smoke. The house had no name ; Mr. Stretton rather piqued himself on every one's knowing where *he* lived.

It was a happy return home, that glowing summer afternoon. Turning off the main road, the carriage skirted the wide, breezy common, tufted with furze, sprinkled with trees ; and begirt by luxuriant shrubberies, opening every here and there, to show the cheerful-looking country residences, among their conservatories and velvet lawns.

Edward drew a long breath. “How pleasant it is to return home !”

“Yes !” said Clara ; “and the garden will

be just in its glory. I hope they have not let it run wild in our absence !”

“Are *you* glad, little one?” said Mr. Stretton kindly, drawing Mabel towards him.

“It is hard on Mabel,” said Edward ; “she has to go back to school. Never mind, Mabel ; the time will soon pass for you to leave.”

Mabel slowly lifted her large, dark-grey eyes, opened wider than usual, with a puzzled, questioning look. “Shall I live here then ?” she asked.

“Of course !” said Edward, hastily. “You know”—something in the child’s face made him stop, and alter his sentence. “It wouldn’t seem like home to either of us without her, would it, Clara ?”

“She is a spoiled child,” said Clara, good-naturedly, patting the little hand which was half-timidly slid into hers ; “I don’t know what we should do without her.”

The carriage now stopped at a wide swing-

gate, which the footman sprang down to open. The handsome old red-brick house, with stone copings, and glittering brass knocker, looked cheerily forth from the semi-circle of sweeping trees and glossy evergreens, within which the broad gravel road girdled the small velvet lawn. The coach-yard gates were thrown open; a small side gate, also open, showed behind the house another lawn, such as are to be found only in old gardens; its broad sunshine dappled here and there with masses of shade, from spreading cedar or feathering beech; while beyond, the cattle were seen grouped round great elm-trunks, in the wide paddock.

A servant out of livery came forward as the carriage drove up; and several dogs, rushing forth from house and yard, sprang upon the arriving party, whom they almost overwhelmed with their boisterous caresses. Mabel, especially, was nearly knocked down by a tall mastiff, who put both his fore paws on her shoulders.

Edward stood for a minute, half-absent, looking around him ; patting at the same time the head of a favourite spaniel, which was pressing against his knee with an eager whine of welcome. Clara sprang up the stone steps, waiting at the top for her father, who ascended them more slowly. And then the whole party entered the large, square, old-fashioned hall, paved with alternate diamonds of black and white stone ; a bed-room gallery running round above, a low, wide staircase at the farther end, and beyond, a glass door opening to the garden.

Just within the hall-door stood the comely Devonshire nurse, who had nursed all Mr. Stretton's children, and still looked in her prime. To part with *her*, would have been like parting with one of themselves ; to seek another situation, would have seemed to her equally against nature. In a household of more pretension, her present position would have been dignified with the style and title of

“housekeeper;” but with the Strettons she was still only “nurse.” Her actual functions consisted chiefly in nursing any one who happened to be ill in the house; attending zealously to “the Master’s” and “the young Master’s” personal comforts; and going through a perpetual course of making and repairing for “the young gentlemen;” whose rendings and out-growings would alone have furnished sufficient employment for any less energetic person.

Nurse curtsied with extreme deference to the family, as they entered; but Edward and Clara went up quickly and shook hands with her, enquiring, half playfully, half earnestly, concerning all that had transpired in their absence. Mabel ran up and kissed her, then slipped upstairs. Mr. Stretton, with a good-natured “Quite well, Nurse? All right at home?” passed on into the dining room; where he was soon seated in his easy chair, with his favourite dog at his feet, and reading the

morning paper as quietly as if he had never stirred from home.

“ I shall come up in five minutes to dress, ” said Clara to the maid, who was superintending the unpacking of the carriage ; “ I must just look at the garden first ; ” and speeding through the glass door, she was out of sight in a moment.

Edward, meanwhile, had rather slowly followed his father into the dining-room ; a large and lofty apartment, running along the front of the house. The windows were all open ; massive evergreens without, and Venetian blinds within, threw a cool, refreshing shadow over the crimson-toned furniture. Edward walked to the wide end-window, opened the blinds, and stood looking out at the extensive prospect. The room was a great favourite with the family, on account of this view, the only one which the house commanded, and which was cheerily reflected in the lofty mirror over the sideboard. From

the other rooms, nothing could be seen but the grounds behind, or glimpses, through the trees, of the common in front.

“What are you thinking of, Edward?” said his father, at last.

“Only how charming this place is! I wish it were our own.”

“Why, what puts that into your head all at once? The lease can be renewed, no doubt, as long as it suits any of us to live here; but by and bye you may be richer than I am, or poorer, for aught we can say; either way, the place mightn’t do for you; and what would be the good of being encumbered with it?—or you may marry some one who doesn’t care for the place, and would not like to be tied to it.”

“I don’t think I should easily care for any one who would *not* care for it!” said Edward. “The only thing I envy in old family estates, is the permanent possession, the settled feeling of *home*. But where can Mabel have hidden herself?” he added, suddenly interrupt-

ing himself. "She has not been like the same child since that morning at Ringwood." And he went out into the hall, and called her ; "Mabel ! where are you ?"

Mabel came running down stairs.

"Don't you want to see how your garden has fared without you ?" And presently they were out together, planning and consulting as usual.

Edward always seemed so much nearer her own age than Clara ; yet he was nearly twenty, and Clara only just twenty-one.

"I must just see how Phœbe is going on," said Edward, as they came to a gate leading to the stable yard. "You can look at your garden meanwhile."

"May I not come and see her too ?"

"Oh ! if you like." And he had soon lifted her upon his beautiful bay mare, where she sat with her hands twisted in the mane of the gentle creature, which curved its neck towards her for a caress.

"It is late," said Edward, at length, looking at his watch; "run on, Mab, you will only just have time." He lifted her off as he spoke; and while he stayed to give some orders, she followed the winding path which led to her own little garden.

Presently, however, she came slowly and sadly back, holding in her hand the snapped-off stem of a young larch.

"Oh! Edward! my tree! my beautiful tree, which you gave me on my birthday!"

He took the spray from her hand, and followed her hurried steps to the scene of the disaster. Tiny hoof-prints, and a general nibbled appearance, left no doubt as to the cause of this misfortune, and of the desolate aspect of the little garden, usually so trim and gay.

"That naughty Bess (a pet kid) has been trespassing again, Mabel. It is hard that she should just have chosen your garden. But never mind, dear; we will soon have all this

mischievous put to rights. Come along, and we will talk to Gibson about it; and I'll send some better fencing down to-morrow."

He drew her good-naturedly away; and long before going in, she had quite forgotten her troubles.

Clara, having completed her hasty survey, hurried in, to dress for dinner; and came down bright and buoyant, her close travelling dress exchanged for her favourite summer attire of soft white muslin, which contrasted so well with her almost oriental eyes and hair. From a most lovely mother, Clara inherited, besides the dark hair and eyes, something of the softness of outline; while her spirited, half-saucy expression, and the decision, almost impatience, of her every look and gesture, were such a contrast to her mother's yielding gentleness, as often to make the personal likeness scarcely perceptible.

Edward, on the other hand, had the marked Stretton features, which people differed as to

considering handsome ; and the fair Stretton complexion : a source of no small shame and annoyance to him in his boyhood, and a favourite mark for his companions' teasing, until dyed by his out-door habits to a tint several degrees darker than the bright brown hair with which nature had meant it to contrast the other way.

Clara knew very well that she was not, as her mother had been, what is technically styled "a beauty ;" on the other hand, she was perfectly aware of her good looks ; was very glad of them ; and thought very little about them.

She was clever too—could do, as the phrase is, anything she liked. *That*, too, was an established fact ; of that, also, she was quite conscious, and very glad ; perhaps even more glad to be clever than to be pretty. But there was nothing to dwell upon in such a state of things ; no one disputed it. Where was the use of asserting what nobody

questioned? -- She would have a good fortune, no doubt; nothing remarkable, but such as a man in her father's position would naturally give a beloved and only daughter. This had always been, in her mind, and in the minds of all about her, a matter of course; it was comfortable, but not exciting; and in no way distinguished her from many young friends by whom she was surrounded. Her social position—ah!—*that* rather more deeply interested her feelings! The idea of being, after all, only a tradesman's daughter, now and then galled her a little; more, perhaps, than her pride itself would permit her to own. But the evil was only in idea; the drawbacks, the mortifications, which her fancy now and then pictured, never came near her in her actual life; and her real position was one of too much ease, independence, consideration, and happiness, to make repining possible, even to a disposition only half as affectionate and

genial as hers. Still, this *was* the sensitive point. The one earthly good which she held not in unquestioned possession, seemed to her, like all uncertain or unattainable blessings, of more engrossing interest than all the rest.

Clara had been in some respects peculiarly circumstanced. The responsible and conspicuous place which she had held, since her mother's death, as only daughter, and eldest of the family, had given her an odd feeling in intercourse with her young companions, and caused her quite involuntarily to assume with those of her own age the manners of eldership, which she had acquired in her home circle. She could hardly feel herself an irresponsible girl like the rest. She seemed, too, to have fewer thoughts to spare for mere personal admiration. "She treats one as if one were only her brother," had been a murmur more than once raised against her, and with some show of justice. For this

“treating like a brother” had in Clara’s case no sentimental background, but was simply the habitual, frank, good-natured, elder-sisterly manner of superior wisdom, and ready helpfulness, more tantalizing and discouraging than any *hauteur* or any coquetry could possibly have been.

On a table in the drawing-room were various notes, which had arrived for Clara during her absence from home. These she began to examine, while waiting for dinner.

“How tiresome it is, when people leave their best parties till the holidays begin !” she exclaimed, as she handed to her brother two notes of invitation. “The boys are so vexed if I go out and leave them !”

“They ought to be going to bed about the time that you would be going out,” said her father.

“Yes ! I know they *ought* ; but one hasn’t the heart to send the poor fellows to bed early in holiday-time.”

“You didn’t mind going out last holidays,” said Edward.

“Don’t you remember—it was Christmas, and there were only juvenile parties, or half-juvenile, at least ; to which they could go with us—New Year’s Eve, and Twelfth-Night, and so on. Now, we couldn’t take them to these balls ; just fancy the sensation two wild schoolboys would excite !”

“You don’t really mean to give up those two parties, of all others !” said her brother, in astonishment. “They have capital balls at both those houses.”

“Well, I don’t know ; there is no need to refuse them ; but I doubt whether I shall have the heart to go, when I see John and Fred looking so dull and disconcerted.”

Edward might well look surprised ; for Clara was the very queen of the dance. Who her partners were, she cared little ; it was a proper, regular thing, that certain partners should ask her to dance ; and no one

had much objection, she was so striking-looking, and danced so well. Still, she regarded all as merely paying the due tribute to her position ; and beyond this, it was only the exercise itself which she delighted in.

“ You would make an excellent step-mother, Clara ; you might scold the children a little now and then, but you would spoil them enough to satisfy the most exacting kindred.”

“ How can you talk such nonsense, Edward !” she exclaimed, looking considerably more annoyed than the cause seemed to warrant—“ when you know it is what I dislike the very thought of. I don’t think *anything* would induce me to become a step-mother.”

“ My dear Clara, no one wishes you to be one ; but take care ; people always do what they declare they will not.” Then, catching sight of his sister’s flushed face, he added, in an altered tone, “ But you know I was only

talking in jest ; I did not mean to vex you.” And the announcement that dinner was ready broke off the conversation.

After dinner, Clara beguiled her father into a short stroll, to look at his promising hay-fields and thriving cattle. But Mr. Stretton was rather disposed to take things quietly, after his three weeks’ travelling. The whole party, indeed, when the first excitement was over, felt somewhat listless, and lounged away the evening in the pleasant, cool drawing-room. The French windows were open to the lawn ; and when the lamp was brought in, it was placed on a table in a shady corner, that it might not spoil the effect of the moon, rising above the great elm-trees, and throwing on the turf minutely characteristic shadows of the various trees and shrubs.

Clara sat down on a stool at her father’s feet, leaning back against his knee.

“ I really am tired ! But what a pleasant

excursion we have had!—and how charming it is to be at home again!”

“Yes,” said Edward, looking up from his book. (He had thrown himself into an easy-chair, in a very listless attitude.) “Only it is vexatious not to have seen the Chace after all.”

“Well, so it is,” said Clara; “but I thought *you* cared less about that than I did.”

“I believe I care more about it *now*, than at the time. One could only think at first of the shock, and of poor Mrs. Stretton. But so often as we have planned going there! and something always happening to prevent it; and then, when we were on the spot, to have the whole thing cut short! After all, we know very little more about the place than we have known all along, from those old county books. It is like the stories about enchanted islands!”

“Don’t you like to have something to look

forward to; something you are not quite certain about?" asked Mabel, looking up suddenly. She had been reading in a corner, and they had hardly noticed her.

"Well, I believe I do," said Edward, after a moment's pause. He looked rather struck and startled.

"And I," said Clara, "care only for what is real and certain. That is the difference.—But come, Mab, dear, you ought to be going to bed."

And Mabel at once, though rather lingeringly, obeyed her. Very few ever thought of questioning Clara's will.

Next day, things had fallen much into their usual train. Edward drove his father up to business (with some inward enjoyment of the sensation which the high-stepping mare, his recent purchase, excited on the road); father and son both returning to a six o'clock dinner. Clara, in their absence, flitted from dairy to store-room, from flower-beds and conservatory

to forcing-houses and kitchen garden ; with quiet intervals in her own snug morning-room up-stairs. She made the most of her short-lived peace and leisure ; in two days “ the boys ” were expected ; and for managing *them*, there was no hope but in Clara.

Not that they by any means uniformly obeyed her ; but *she* had the best chance with them ; her sudden, uncompromising commands often *surprised* them into obedience.

Their father was to them rather a play-fellow than a ruler. The plodding man of business was still half a boy at heart ; a quiet under-current of fun and mischief gave a peculiar charm to all the enterprises and frolics devised by him for their diversion. His sharp, short anger, indeed, when he *was* angry, made them, for some time after, take good care not to incur it again. But his nature shrank from anger, as from all disturbance and excitement. When the boys became unruly, he usually turned them over

to Clara ; he had them so little with him, he said, he only wanted to enjoy them. At school, they avowedly lived under a rule of terror. Against the master personally, they bore no positive grudge ; indeed, when he was once alarmingly ill, John had been heard doubtfully suggesting to a schoolfellow :—
“ Would it not be a pity now, after all, if the old fellow were to pop off ? ” But they regarded him simply as a natural enemy, against whom a peculiar code obtained ; whom they owed it to themselves to disobey, elude, or beguile—in all ways not incompatible with a fair chance of escaping punishment, and not involving an actual *lie* — that impossibility to all English gentlemen, of whatever age or station.

CHAPTER III.

IT was no use "making believe" at peace and quietness, with the holidays "looming in the distance." The coming event *would* throw (not its *shadow*) before ; *that* would hardly be a fitting expression for the odd, unacknowledged anticipation of coming pleasure which pervaded the household. "The boys" were certainly great plagues ; the "young gentlemen" were "terrible unruly ;" yet no one, in the house or out of it, but was secretly glad at the prospect of their return.

Clara gave up her own occupations in

despair ; scarce an hour passed, without some member or other of the establishment applying to her for instructions on the subject of the “young gentlemen !” The rooms must be prepared ; the ponies exercised and *looked to*. Only Martin, the prim upper housemaid,—a very Tartar of tidiness—begged deferentially that a fresh set of covers might be given out, to protect the drawing-room furniture. “The young gentlemen,” she said, “did racket everything to pieces in such a fashion !”

Nurse was in full force. Scarcely had she relieved her mind, by rendering to Clara a strict account of her stewardship during the family’s absence from home—an account which no consideration would induce the old woman to omit, and which was therefore put up with out of regard to her feelings—than she threw herself, with renewed zest, into her true vocation ; rising early and lying down late ; there was so much to be done “against the young gentlemen came home.”

There was indeed plenty to be done; before their arrival, during their stay; that long-looked-for period, so brief when it did come, was sure well-nigh to absorb the energies of all; until the moment of mingled regret and relief, when the coach should again whirl away the unruly visitors, to give the luckless schoolmaster once more the pleasure of their company.

John and Fred returned, ruddy and sun-burnt; grown at all points, to a degree by no means favourable to elegance, either in costume or bearing; and altogether in a state which made Nurse groan as she exclaimed:

“Well! how them school-keeping folk do neglect young gentlemen’s best cloth clothes is more than I can understand!”

While Clara, the first morning at breakfast, felt it necessary to interrupt the programme of amusements and expeditions, which the boys were arranging with their father, to say—

“First of all, papa, would you be so good as to take them up to the tailor’s? I really am ashamed for any one to see them while they are such figures.”

There was a suppressed groan — sister Clara always was so tiresome! — but they submitted with a tolerable grace, and with the meekness of newly-arrived guests.

The first week was really bearable, even pleasant; but all knew that the delusive calm would not last! All were too well accustomed to see them pass gradually through the various phases of demeanour — well-behaved at first, almost to shyness, amid their glee; then waxing by degrees wild and uproarious, till the house could scarcely hold them.

Mabel, by nature overflowing with spirits, had usually been well able to hold her own with the two boys; and had indeed often been excited by their presence to a degree of wildness scarcely inferior to theirs.

Since the Ringwood adventure, however,

a change seemed to have come over her ; she did not shake off the shock ; instead of a play-fellow, she became a victim.

“ What is come to you, Mab ? you are grown as bad as Arthur.”

Arthur was Mabel's darling little brother ; a grave, shy child, of ten years, brought up by his aged grandparents, with no playfellows, and but scanty teaching. He inherited his father's genius ; and his nature seemed to find in *drawing* its only outlet. Clara was constantly inviting the lonely child, especially in Mabel's holidays ; but if it was also “ the boys' ” holiday-time, she generally contrived to send *them* off on some interminable pony-expedition, that Arthur might escape their teasing, and have his own Queen Mab to himself in peace.

Seeing that Mabel continued pale and absent, Clara made the usual arrangements for a visit from Arthur ; thinking that a long day with him would rouse and cheer her.

And a merry morning the two passed together ; Arthur was always merry and childlike when with Mabel.

The boys were not to be back till evening ; and Clara had planned to send Arthur home before their return, to save him from the chance of their rather rough practical jesting.

During the holidays the children always dined with the family, unless there was "company," which rarely occurred ;—Clara had begged off from dinner-parties, since her mother's death had placed her at the head of the house and table.

This day, as usual, Mabel and Arthur were with Clara in the drawing-room, waiting for Mr. Stretton and Edward to return to dinner. Edward, however, arrived first.

"Uncle is driving down with the Governor, Clara," he said, "so I asked a neighbour to give me a lift. Poor Mabel !" he added, laughing, as he caught her disconcerted look, "I am sorry for you ; but don't tell him, as

you did once, you know, that you wish he wouldn't come here so often."

Mabel looked overpowered with shame, but nowise penitent. Just then the gig drove up, and in two or three minutes Mr. Stretton and Mr. Hurburne entered.

Mr. Hurburne, the only brother of Mr. Stretton's late wife, had been, from the time of that marriage, his partner in business. To his talent and enterprise it was generally supposed that the family were indebted, in great measure, for their present position; though the marriage had been considered at the time a rare piece of good fortune for his charming, portionless sister; and the introduction into Mr. Stretton's old established house of business, no less a lift for the clever, uncouth, half-educated country lad himself. In the sister, a peculiar innate grace of mind and manner had supplied the deficiencies of scanty training. The hard-headed man had educated himself while making his fortune. He had some of

his sister's refinement, in taste if not in feeling ; and spent his thousands, if with more zest and conscious enjoyment than those who are born to wealth, yet with quite as little thought of display ; thus wholly escaping the vulgarity of the *parvenu*. Wealth he valued solely for the power it gave, and the enjoyments, chiefly intellectual, which it could procure. Being unmarried, he was of course practically a richer man than Mr. Stretton, and lived as such. His large, burly figure, and broad, florid face, were redeemed from coarseness by their character of massive power, and by the deep-set, piercing black eyes. Something, perhaps, of the unconscious insolence of abounding wealth and health combined with a certain callousness of nature to render his manner occasionally harsh, and his remarks grating ; but it was only the fastidious who complained of this ; while all agreed that his sterling excellencies well merited indulgence for any such minor faults.

“ Well, Clara,” said her uncle, as he shook hands with her, “ how do you like your brother’s fine new purchase ? I advise you to persuade your father not to trust himself with her ; she stumbled two or three times on our way home. Young bones are soon mended ; but an accident at your father’s age would be no laughing matter.”

“ Uncle, how can you frighten Clara so ?” exclaimed Edward, angrily ; “ she will be miserable now every time we are five minutes later than usual. And I can’t understand about the mare stumbling ; she never did so with me.”

“ No, Edward,” said his father, “ so I told your uncle.”

“ Oh ! *he* was driving ?”—Edward broke off abruptly.

“ Don’t be frightened, my girl,” said Mr. Stretton, “ there is no danger.”

“ Oh no ! *I won’t* be frightened,” said Clara, with a little toss back of the head, as if rather indignantly shaking off the alarm which

she felt that her uncle had wantonly excited. She had turned rather pale, but her colour came back brighter than usual as she spoke.

“Come, Mabel,” she said, as the gentlemen left the room to prepare for dinner, “I hope that I have had *your* share this time ; so you may escape having anything disagreeable said to you.”

In a short time the whole party were seated at the dinner-table.

It really seemed as if Clara had indeed served as lightning-conductor for the rest ; the dinner passed off in most pleasant conversation. Mr. Hurburne was full of the different exhibitions, of pictures especially, then open for the season. He was a liberal and judicious patron of art, in which his fine taste entitled him to rank as connoisseur.

To Mabel and Arthur such subjects had been household words from infancy ; they listened to every word with eager eyes and rapt attention.

Dessert was placed on the table, and the servants left the room.

“By the bye,” said Mr. Hurburne suddenly, “some of us have been getting up a society for the benefit of artists’ children, left unprovided for. As I am treasurer, I might, perhaps, get Arthur a nomination for the next vacancy. Only there may be a difficulty, as poor Mr. Arleigh did not at all distinguish himself in his profession.”

“*We* thought his pictures beautiful,” interrupted Edward; “and so does Dr. Harland, who is as good a judge as anyone.”

“Mab, dear,” said Clara, “won’t you and Arthur like a run together in the garden, before he goes home?”

“At any rate,” pursued Mr. Hurburne, as the children were eagerly rising to make their escape, “we may find some institution where Mabel might be received, and respectably educated to maintain herself. Of course she would be glad to be no longer a burden on you.”

“Uncle,” exclaimed Clara, suddenly rising, “it is so hot, I must go out on the lawn with the children. Excuse me!” she threw up the large end-window, pushed them out before her, and sprang down after them.

“You naughty little thing, to be looking *so* ! I should like to shake you!” she exclaimed, half stifling Mabel with kisses, as soon as they were out of sight and hearing. “You shall be punished, by never dining with us when my uncle comes.”

“Oh, thank you, Clara !” said Mabel.

“Now, Arthur, it is time for you to be off ; we must walk to meet the coach ; and be sure and tell grandpapa that we think your last drawings wonderfully improved ; and that, if you work very hard, you may paint some day almost as well as your dear papa. Mind, I don’t say *quite* as well ; there are not many who can do *that*.”

“I know,” said the boy, opening his large eyes ; “but *I* will.”

“There’s a good boy! Come, Mabel, we must get our bonnets; it is later than I thought.”

“Mayn’t I bring yours, dear?” asked Mabel.

“Not a bit of it, Mab. Come, which will be ready first?”

CHAPTER IV.

THE little party were soon equipped, and walked quickly along the golden common, glowing in the slanting afternoon sun; then turning out upon the main road, they went on in cheerful chat till they met the coach. After Clara had given many charges as to Arthur's destination and safety, they watched him out of sight, then turned to walk home.

In a few minutes, they met Edward hastening to meet them. "You are just in time to walk back with us, Edward," said his sister; "you know I must be home to make

tea; and besides, the boys will be returning."

"Well, walk slowly, at any rate," said Edward, "one wants to breathe a little. I made my escape as soon as I could, and left uncle and father together. It's surprising how they always get on. Pity me, Mab,"—turning to the little girl,—“all day long at his mercy. There I sit, all cosy at my desk; the Governor opposite at his; and there *he* sits, in the next room, just a wooden partition between us, with a door in it, which he can come through any minute. Luckily, he doesn't often come; he is too busy in his own den, with great books and heaps of papers. But I couldn't bear it, Clara, except for dear mamma's sake. She was so fond of him, and proud of him; and father thinks all he does must be right. To be sure, uncle never ventures to say such things to *him*! Mab!" turning suddenly round to her, "you didn't mind him, did you? I told him, after you

were gone, that you were just the same as a relation ; a cousin, you know. We don't seem ever to have had any, unless that poor fellow who is dead was one ; you remember, at Ringwood, Mabel ?”

Mabel turned pale, and shivered, as she had done at the time.

“ Clara,” she said, after a moment's silence, “ my *mamma's* name was *Stretton* before she married papa. I saw it in one of her books : ‘ Margaret Stretton.’ ”

“ You little darling !” exclaimed Clara, catching hold of her, “ you must be a relation, and that is what makes us so fond of you.”

“ I don't think—I'm afraid not,” said Mabel, hesitating. “ Papa didn't like to come and paint your papa ; and mamma said, ‘ I assure you there is no relationship.’ ”

“ But why did you never tell us ?”

“ I didn't like ; and papa told me not ; and mamma too.” And Mabel, puzzled and excited, and feeling as if she had done wrong,

stopped short, colouring deeper and deeper, and trying hard not to cry.

"Never mind," said Edward, "if you won't be a cousin, you are to be my wife, you know, so it doesn't signify."

"You know, Edward, I *won't*."

They had just reached the house, and Mabel ran in. Edward pretended to chase her; then turned to have a few words with his sister in the hall. But just at that moment was heard the rapid trot of ponies on the gravel sweep; and presently "the boys" rushed in, flushed and excited.

"Oh, Clara, we have had such a famous day!" and both were beginning an eager account, contradicting each other impatiently at nearly every statement.

"Hush, both of you!—uncle is here."

"Oh, is he?" exclaimed Fred, "that's jolly! Now we'll go and ask him to take us to the theatre."

"You *know*, Clara," said John, "you

promised to take us, and you never have."

"Yes, John; I *did* promise, and vexed enough I am about it; but papa can't bear going out after he has been all day at business, and I am afraid to take you without him."

"Oh, well, never mind," said Fred, "we'll go and ask uncle, and I know he'll take us, he always does. Come along, John." And he dragged John with him into the dining-room, where Mr. Hurburne and Mr. Stretton still sat talking, awaiting Clara's summons to tea.

"But it won't be such fun," said John, "if father doesn't go."

"How fond those boys are of uncle!" said Clara, "not the least bit afraid of him! I remember, I used to like him, at their age."

"*I* never did," said Edward, with unwonted sturdiness. "But, Clara," he continued, following his sister into the drawing-

room, "how strange this is about Mabel! And do you remember what they told us at Ringwood about Mrs. Stretton's sister? I *do* hope they will not claim her."

"What do you mean?" said Clara. "I only wish such good fortune may be in store for the poor child."

"Yes; but she is very happy here. Yet, of course, we must enquire about it, and not let her lose her rights. She has no one but us to look after her interests."

"And poor little Arthur!" said Clara. "I should be so glad for his sake. It makes my heart ache to send that timid little fellow all alone through London by the coach; yet papa won't let me send him home in the carriage; and very right too. He says I must not unfit him for the way in which he will have to go through the world. But he wants a kind, happy home, and quite a different sort of teaching; he is so clever, but so peculiar and over-thoughtful. We might manage for Mabel,

but I don't know what would become of him."

"We must enquire about it at once," said Edward.

"I will talk to papa about it to-morrow," said Clara. "(Please, Edward, ring the bell for tea.) Certainly no time should be lost."

"We shall lose Mabel," said Edward.

"Ah yes, that is true; yet I should be glad, dear little helpless thing! I can't bear the thought of her having to battle with the world; it would not be half as bad for *me*."

Here the urn was brought in.

"Ask Barlow to come for my walking-things, and in five minutes tell the gentlemen that tea is ready.—You know, Edward, that I, who have been waited on all my life, have hardly patience to let Barlow dress me; only I must keep her in practice, or she would be awkward with visitors. Now Mabel sits down, in a sort of absent way, and holds her

head for those long, auburn curls of hers to be brushed—and stands, in a kind of dream, to have her things put on. I can't bear to interfere ; and the servants are so fond of her, they all wait on her ; and, of course, I wish them to think her one of ourselves. I thought school would put all right ; but as soon as she comes home here again, she falls into the same ways. And we can't hope that papa will adopt her ; so I should like to see the little darling settled at Ringwood Chace, where these ways would be matters of course. I used to wonder how they came. I suppose her mamma accustomed her to them. That was very natural, if it was what she had always been used to herself."

Edward had listened to his sister's arguments with much attention, but with a look that by no means expressed acquiescence. He paused, however, as if hardly knowing how to reply ; and before he could do so, Barlow came for the bonnet and cloak. Then Mabel

crept in shyly, to say good'night ;—she was so sleepy and tired, might she go to bed ?

And as soon as she was gone, Mr. Stretton and Mr. Hurburne, with the boys, came in to tea. The latter were in high delight—their uncle had promised to take them to the theatre the very next week.

After tea they sat in tranced attention, while Mr. Hurburne related and commented upon the details of a fearful murder, for which the trial was then going on, and with which the public were almost wholly engrossed. He recapitulated the particulars with graphic vividness, and, where the subject admitted, with a certain grim humour. Fred's eyes grew wider, and his cheek paler every minute, yet he resisted all his sister's injunctions to go to bed. John, indeed, first stretched himself on the carpet, at his father's feet, then rested his head on Mr. Stretton's knee, and gradually fell fast asleep. But Clara was heartily glad when at last her uncle, looking at his watch,

exclaimed that he must be off, or he should miss the coach. He never, by any chance, slept at Mr. Stretton's.

When she went up to bed, Clara peeped, as usual, into the little, white-curtained room within her own. To her surprise, Mabel, usually the soundest of sleepers, was sitting up in her little French bed, looking rather flushed and eager.

"Clara," she began almost immediately, "I wish I belonged to some one."

"You belong to us, dear child, till some one better gets hold of you."

"But if I only had a *right* to you! But perhaps!" she exclaimed eagerly—"papa said you were no relations, I know; but you always think you are relations of Mrs. Stretton, at Ringwood, don't you?"

"We may be related to her some way or other, as you may be to us, without any of us ever knowing the rights of it. But what has that to do with the matter?"

“Because,” said Mabel, “I belong to *them*—at least to that one whom they were burying. I knew it quite well—it was as if they had been burying my own brother.” And she shuddered, as she had done before.

“But,” said Clara, evasively, “if you belong to them, you will have to leave us; for they will never recognize *us* as relations.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mabel, with a deep sigh. “And yet,” she went on, “poor grandpapa and grandmamma can’t keep me, I know”—here the child’s face became crimson—“or I sometimes think I would go to them. Oh! Clara, do you remember the torrent, by our pretty Welsh home? You know the whole cottage used to be full of the sound. And I have it now always in my ears.”

“My dear child,” said Clara, in her decided way, “you will be ill. You were frightened at Ringwood; and now my uncle has teased you with his nonsense, just as he does all of us. Now go to sleep, there’s a good girl.

You know this is your home, and we all like to have you."

And Mabel, having held up her face to be kissed, turned round and went to sleep; and woke in the morning, her own merry, child-like self.

CHAPTER V.

NEXT morning, Clara, as usual, accompanied her father in his stroll through the grounds, before he set off to business. Not only lawn, flower-garden, and shrubbery were visited and commented on ;—the cow-shed, the stack-yard, even the piggery—every department of the miniature farm, was passed in review and discussed with deep interest by father and daughter.

This was Clara's time for confidential talk with her father ; for pleading the cause of some offending dependent ; for confessing and

softening some escapade of the boys ; for winning Mr. Stretton's consent to some rather startling piece of expense, or, far more difficult, to some little bit of what he deemed unwarranted display. Mr. Stretton, indulgent as he was to his children, was yet, in a certain way, a good deal feared by them ; he was a true Stretton, though the gentlest of the race ; his *will* was neither to be changed nor questioned. So it was with some hesitation and misgiving that Clara at length began upon the subject now uppermost in her thoughts. She had not summoned 'up her courage till they were taking the last lingering turn under the great elm trees, before going in to breakfast.

“ Papa, do you remember Mabel's mother ? ”

“ What made you think of that, my dear ? — Oh yes, I remember her, of course, very well, though you know we did not see much of her. She seemed a soft, pleasing woman — had been pretty too, no doubt.”

“But, papa, Mabel says her mamma’s maiden name was Stretton.”

“You don’t say so ! That is curious. How came she never to tell us before ?”

“She says her papa did not wish it mentioned.”

“What could be the reason of that, I wonder ? But he was a little eccentric, as artists often are, and rather over-proud and particular. A nice, gentlemanly fellow, though, and painted better than half that are made twice the fuss about. So his wife’s name was Stretton ? No dearth of Strettons now-a-days ! One hears of them on every side. You are in a fair way, my dear, to have your wish for cousins gratified at last.”

“But, papa, Mabel thinks that they belong to the Ringwood Strettons.”

“Ringwood Strettons !—Nonsense !” in a tone of extreme impatience. “My dear Clara, you really must not be putting your own fanciful notions into the child’s head. She

has already heard you and Edward, I suppose, talking about being related to the Ringwood Strettons, till she begins to think the same of herself. I am quite tired of this folly about the Ringwood Strettons !”

“ Now, don’t be cross, there’s a dear papa ; we have not put any notions into her head ; but she thinks—you know she is an odd child, yet there may be something in it. You remember the inn-keeper telling us about Mrs. Stretton’s sister ?”

“ Oh, I do not trouble myself about such things ; I remember his telling us some long story or other.”

“ About Mrs. Stretton’s sister, who married, do you not remember ?—and whose children would now be heirs to the estate ? You know, the man said she had married quite *away*, as he called it, and they did not know whether she were alive or dead.”

“ Well, my dear, if it should turn out so, it would be very fortunate for them, poor little

things. I only wish it were so, with all my heart."

"But, papa, don't you think we should make some enquiries—should let it be known where these children are? You know Mrs. Stretton may not be aware of their existence, or know where to find them."

Her earnestness began to make an impression on her father, who seemed at last disposed to look at the matter in the light she wished.

"We must enquire about it, my dear; but don't unsettle the child. Suppose you write to old Mr. and Mrs. Arleigh; they are the most likely persons to know. But is it not breakfast-time? You must not worry yourself too much about your *protégée*," concluded Mr. Stretton, taking his daughter's hand, and playing with it affectionately as they moved quickly towards the house.

Clara wisely let the matter drop; but when breakfast was over, and the little party had

dispersed to their various doings, she settled herself snugly in her own unapproachable morning-room, and wrote a brief, clear statement of facts and conjectures, for Mr. Arleigh's benefit ; requesting that, as so much might be at stake for the children, he would inform her father at once of all the particulars bearing on the subject. Then she shook off her abstraction, brushed back the raven hair which had fallen over her face in her intense absorption over her letter, and went quietly down into the kitchen, according to her invariable morning custom, to give orders for the day.

All household instincts were strong in Clara ; the love of children, the love of domestic management—indeed of *management* generally—of keeping things and people in order, and putting to rights whatever was wrong. The practical, in all departments, was her gift ; the real, the present, was her element. The day, with its business and its pleasures, sufficed for her active nature. She

did not require, as Mabel had truly said that Edward did, something to look forward to, something not quite certain. Thus she could never be said thoroughly to understand her brother; in whom this visionary element, curiously in contrast with his matter-of-fact daily life, gave to his whole actual existence a peculiar, vague colouring of associations and anticipations. He devoted himself with steady perseverance to the prosaic details of his father's business; it was his birthright, handed down through several generations; he was the son, the grandson, the great-grandson of tradesmen; he was proud of his *order*. Something of the same nature was his fanciful liking for his sister's little *protégée*. People generally saw in Mabel a winning little girl, rather pretty, rather clever, rather odd. He only saw in the child what he had settled in his own mind that the woman would become.

"Mabel," said Clara to her that afternoon,

“ would you not like to come with me to-day ? I have a whole round of calls to make ; I should like to have you to keep me company.”

Her heart clung regretfully to the favourite little companion, whom she felt inwardly assured she should not long be permitted to retain.

“ Oh, thank you, Clara, dear ! I should like it so much ; only you will let me stay in the carriage when you go into the houses ? ”

“ Why, that would be a pity, Mab ; some of the people are so kind and pleasant. At one place there are some girls just your own age.”

“ But they will not know or care anything about me ;—I would rather stay in the carriage.”

“ You proudest of little mortals ! ” exclaimed Clara, laughing, yet half provoked. “ Well, then, you must take a book to amuse you. Only be sure to be ready in time.”

Clara was very punctual, Mabel decidedly the reverse.

The child gave a somewhat wistful glance from under her deep eye-lashes, as if to see whether her friend were displeased with her.

Clara caught the look, just as she was turning quickly away.

“It’s all right, dear,” she replied to the mute interrogation; goodnatureedly patting Mabel on the cheek as she spoke. “Now run off, and put on your things, there is only just time.”

It was always a great indulgence to Mabel, when Clara invited her to be her companion in these long, pleasant drives. For this was so far a country-neighbourhood, that the ordinary routine of *morning calls* involved drives of considerable length. Mabel enjoyed the broad, smooth road, bordered with pleasant meadows or plantations; the bright glimpses of distant hills and woods; the interminable succession of goodly residences,

—“the pleasant homes of England,”—with their sheltering shrubberies, sunny lawns, and abounding gardens ; such abodes as are probably to be met with only in England ; and even there, only around the metropolis, and some few large commercial towns, which they encircle like so many carcanets of jewels.—Abodes for the most part of self-made men ; and differing wholly from the isolated dignity of the country seat ; differing, also, in the absence of that indefinable character which is given by hereditary possession. For loved and cherished as these suburban homes may be, the gathering points of family joys, interests, and associations, it is rarely that they descend even to a second generation ; the father’s fortune, however large, being divided after his death, with at least something like equality, and the old, happy home broken up, because no one member of the family can occupy the father’s place. A wise and equitable arrangement, probably ; an inevitable

one at least ; yet one which has filled many hearts with sadness.

No sad thoughts, however, disturbed Mabel's enjoyment, as she leaned forward to drink in the balmy summer breeze, which seemed every minute to catch some fresh perfume from the blooming land over which it passed ; as she speculated, with a child's play of fancy, upon the occupants of every attractive residence ; their characters, feelings, and pursuits. She scarcely required to have recourse to her book for amusement, even when Clara's visits were more than usually prolonged.

“ I am sorry you did not come in with me this time,” said Clara, as she re-entered the carriage, after even Mabel had begun to wonder at the length of her stay ; “ there were some nice pictures and engravings, which you would have enjoyed seeing. I must take you there another day, when you are braver. I dared not have you in this time, for—they are good, kind people, but they *do* make a fuss

about everything ! There would have been so much surprise and dismay at your having remained in the carriage at all ; such elaborate apologies and attentions, if you had come in at last, that you would have been perfectly out of countenance. But now, Mab dear," she added, with a sudden change of manner, " we must begin to think about other matters. You know you are to go back to school in less than a week. I am very sorry to part with you, dear, but it must be ; so we must be preparing in earnest. The horses will be tired to-morrow, after this long drive ; but the next day I must take you with me to London, to fit you out properly."

Mabel was still too young—young in feelings as well as in years—to make a day's shopping of this nature the agreeable excitement that it would have been to one a little older. To personal vanity she had not yet awakened ; and considered all the pains which Clara bestowed upon her (Mabel's) attire, and connected mat-

ters, as very kind, but very tiresome ; something that must be gratefully endured, but still *only* endured. Nor was her imagination, as yet, ripe and strong enough to make the mere day in London, apart from all personal interests, the strange, exciting, intoxicating pleasure which is experienced when the mind can somewhat grasp the mystery of that mighty riddle.

But Mabel had now quite recovered her spirits—all was bright, all was welcome ; such was her happy, free-hearted nature. Even the return to school, (whither Clara always conveyed her herself, punctually on the appointed day), could only momentarily depress her buoyant temperament. John and Fred declared that it was a great shame for her to be sent off just as she was beginning to be good for something again !

CHAPTER VI.

“CLARA,” said Edward one morning to his sister, as they stood lounging together at the garden-door, enjoying the few sunshiny minutes before his starting for business, “I have been talking to father about those parties, and he positively will not hear of your giving them up on the boys’ account. He declares, that rather than you should do so, he will take John and Fred to the theatre himself one of the evenings, and somewhere else—anything we can devise—on the other.”

“Oh! what a dear, good father!” exclaimed

Clara, in undisguised satisfaction. "I really should so much like to go!"

"And you see the boys will be the gainers. It is a rare treat for them to go somewhere alone with the Governor."

"And they have talked of scarcely anything else since my uncle took them; and they like going with papa so much better. Their time is getting short now, poor fellows, and they will really have something to talk and think about when they go back."

Edward very well liked escorting his sister; he was proud of her. Besides, there is no need to have recourse to fraternal affection, to account for a very decided willingness, on his own part, to make one among the guests on the present occasion. This was, in that limited neighbourhood, *the ball par excellence* of the season; the largest rooms, the most tasteful decorations, the finest band, the prettiest girls; many very far prettier than Clara herself; but *that* she really thought, in all sincerity, a de-

cided addition to the charm of the scene. It certainly in no degree weighed upon her spirits; and Edward, his mind pre-occupied with visions of his own, really enjoyed the gaiety with nearly as free a heart as hers. It was a charming evening, a delightful ball, an enchanting *coup-d'œil*. So they said, and so they thought; and, in good truth, neither brother nor sister thought or felt much more on the subject.

It was a pleasant drive home, in the soft summer dawning; the low-hanging moon fading slowly into the blue, and the stars growing pale in the rosy eastern glow.

The conversation, animated at first, had considerably flagged, and Clara was becoming rather sleepy, when the sudden turn into their own gates aroused her.

“My father and the young gentlemen are returned, of course?” enquired Edward of the servant.

“ Oh yes, sir ; at home and in bed for hours.”

The brother and sister passed for a moment into the dining-room, neither of them feeling much inclined to retire to rest. They stood lingeringly at the large end window, gazing out at the fair distant landscape, blushing through its veil of morning mist. As Edward turned to leave the room, he perceived a letter, which they had not before noticed, on the sideboard.

“ A letter for you, Clara,” he said carelessly, just glancing at it as he passed. “ What an odd handwriting !” he exclaimed, as he caught a clearer view of the characters, “ surely I have seen it somewhere before !” And he involuntarily took up the letter. “ Oh ! now I know ! it is Dr. Harland ! those doctors do write the strangest—But what can he have to write about, I wonder ?”

And quite absorbed in examining the superscription, the singularity of which had thus

caught his attention, he continued to hold the letter, in an absent sort of way, turning it about in his fingers, instead of passing it on to his sister; till, receiving no answer to his remarks, he looked up, and saw her standing close beside him, with a flush of displeasure on her cheek.

“Really, Edward!” she began, with an offended air.

“My dear Clara, I beg your pardon!” said Edward, earnestly, waking up to a sense of the breach of good manners he had been guilty of. “I quite forgot—I was only thinking about the handwriting.” And seeing her still holding the letter which he had given her, very much as if she would not open it in his presence, he turned away quickly, to leave the room.

“It is not of the least consequence, Edward, thank you,” she answered, with considerable stiffness. “This letter is only to ask me a very simple question, which I shall have no difficulty in answering.”

She had not yet opened the letter, so there seemed something like *clairvoyance* in her unhesitating statement of its contents. Nor did she open it, even when left alone; but went quietly to her room; submitted patiently to the usual process of disrobing; and did not break the seal till finally shut in by herself for the night.

At breakfast, next morning, loud was the clamour, marvellous and conflicting were the accounts of the last night's wonders. Clara presided at the urn, with even more than her customary quiet regularity, and listened, though with occasional looks of absence, to the disjointed and not very intelligible accounts poured forth on either side.

“Oh! sister Clara! it was as good as being in a *real* battle! the smoke, and the fire, and the groans of the wounded!”—

“Nonsense, John! that was all easy enough—anybody could do that; but the thunder and lightning and the—”

“Sister Clara, do you hear, or do you *not*?” demanded John abruptly, in that imperious tone which nature seems to have assigned, as a distinctive gift, to the more worthy gender.

“My dear John!”—(Clara’s patience was fast oozing out at the ends of her fingers)—“do you think no one has anything to do but to listen to you and Fred quarrelling about such absurdities?”

“Well,” said Master Fred, pertly, “if sister Clara comes home so cross after one of her grand balls, the longer she is before she goes to another the better, *I* say.”

“Fred, be silent this instant!” interposed the father’s voice, in its sternest tones. “Never let me hear you speak in that way again to your sister!”

Fred, thoroughly startled, shrank into himself, and vanished totally from the conversation from that moment.

After breakfast, Clara, scarcely waiting to

bid her father good morning before his departure, shut herself into her morning room, as was her wont when something required her undivided attention. Hastily, bending low over the paper, she wrote one very short note ; her cheeks burning, her eyes heavy and anxious. Then she dashed off, with flowing pen, several light, gossiping epistles to friends at a distance—rang the bell, and desired all to be posted immediately.

“Well, it was a capital ball !” remarked Edward that evening, as the little party were preparing to depart for bed. “But you look tired, Clara ; and no wonder ! you danced so much, and we were home so late. However, I only hope the next may be as good.”

“Oh ! I shall not go to any more at present,” replied Clara, peevishly.

“My dear, why not ?” asked her father, in very reasonable surprise.

“Oh ! I am getting tired of such things ; I am too old now to care about parties.”

Edward and his father looked at each other, and then at her, in utter perplexity. She was trying to light her bed-candle, in a sort of nervous, impatient hurry, which utterly defeated its object. Edward took it from her hand and lighted it.

“Well, you will deprive the boys of their pleasure, if you do not go this next time at least,” was his remark, as he handed her back the candle. “You know that they were to be taken out for the evening expressly on your account.”

“Oh! well, it is very tiresome! Thank you—good night. Good night, father dear!” and trying to smile as usual, she finally left the room.

Clara’s brief reply had been already received by Dr. Harland, as he sat that evening in his large, forlorn London dining-room—so punctiliously appointed, yet so dreary, in the absence of all tokens of feminine taste or employment. His two little girls, whom he

had sent for from the nursery “to keep him company,” were quietly playing together in a corner of the room.

He read the note which was brought him, hurriedly at first, then slowly and deliberately, seeming to weigh every word, to scrutinize even the form of the letters. His countenance, at first anxious and disappointed, assumed gradually a relieved, almost a humorous expression. After a last, lingering examination, he folded up the letter, slowly, and as if unwilling; placed it carefully in the drawer of a large desk which stood open on the table; closed the desk, locked it, and then turned towards the little girls, murmuring in under tones:—

“Never fear, my children—I will give you a mother yet! But I must take you with me, to plead your own cause. So true a woman’s heart will yet find room for you!”

CHAPTER VII.

HAVING once written and despatched her letter, Clara appeared to dismiss the subject wholly from her mind. The next day she was again her own spirited, energetic, good-natured self—absorbed, as usual, in the affairs of the day, and devoted as ever to her special vocation, keeping the boys quiet. *Trying* to keep them quiet, would be a more accurate expression. In that arduous enterprise even Clara often utterly failed of success; and where Clara failed, what mortal so foolhardy as even to make the attempt?

But she was nevertheless heartily sorry, when her two plagues, with rather an ostentatious parade of hilarity, had said the final good-bye—and she had caught the last glimpse of their defiantly waved caps, and extemporized flags of handkerchiefs on sticks, as the coach slowly mounted the dusty hill, then dipped below the brow—and the house was quiet again !

In the dreamy lull which followed, her busy mind soon reverted to other objects ; and she looked anxiously, day by day, for an answer from Mr. Arleigh. But Mr. and Mrs. Arleigh, like most aged and infirm persons, put off, with a sort of hesitating timidity, the task of writing on a complicated business matter. Edward seemed rather graver and less sociable than usual ; and so much absorbed in business, that Clara tried in vain to interest him in her speculations and anticipations.

“I must go and speak to them myself,” she exclaimed, one morning at breakfast,

when the post-time had again brought disappointment.

“Do so, my dear,” said her father. “It is time we knew something.”

“May I go to-morrow?”

“I want you to come to London to-morrow. Will not the next day do?”

So it was fixed. But, as generally happens when a long and important expedition is to be made, something was amiss with the horses; and a further delay was thus caused. The mischief, whatever it was, went lingering on, in a hopeless, irritating way; till Clara said that she must go by some other conveyance.

“Then Edward must go with you,” said Mr. Stretton.

“Will you go to-morrow, Edward?”

Edward was absolutely required in the counting-house the following day. Clara looked irritated, imagining it to be only an excuse; but he did not notice her.

“I really do not see how I could be spared,”

he said, looking appealingly at his father ;
“the next day I could go ; and yet I do not like putting the thing off longer. It is really wrong in us to delay, when so much is at stake for them.”

He was beginning to feel as if he were selfish in the matter. It had always seemed in his mind a settled thing that Mabel should remain with them, sharing all, as one of themselves ; and then,—the “little wife” scheme had been a boy’s joke, chiefly, at first, for the pleasure of teasing her ; but he was older now ; and it was not agreeable to have all cut short at once. And, at any rate, the house would be so dull without her ;—and she was so happy as she was. But it had suddenly flashed upon him, that he had no right, on the possible chance of making her happy hereafter, to deprive her of the independent position to which she was probably entitled.

“My dear boy,” said Mr. Stretton kindly,
“we will manage without you to-morrow.

quite agree with you, that no time should be lost."

That afternoon, Mr. Stretton, Edward, and Clara were together in the drawing-room; Mr. Stretton, according to his custom, diligently studying the newspaper, which he had only hurriedly glanced through at breakfast. Every now and then he read aloud anything that seemed interesting.

"What is this?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Are you there, my girl? This will interest you."

And he read aloud, while Clara, jumping up, looked over his shoulder.

—"Margaret Arleigh, born Stretton, or her representatives, on applying, &c. &c.,—may hear of something to their advantage."—

"Now," said Edward, "she will be spirited away to Ringwood, and we shall know very little more of her."

"Papa," said Clara, "you see how necessary it is to see Mr. and Mrs. Arleigh at once.

I am so glad that Edward can go with me to-morrow."

"I had better go with you myself, my dear," said Mr. Stretton; "this is indeed an important affair."

And after breakfast next morning, Mr. Stretton and Clara started together for the dull suburban district where the old people resided. The journey was tedious not so much from its length, as because their destination lay on the northern side of London, while their own residence was to the south of the metropolis.

At last, after skirting what seemed an interminable range of mean, straggling neighbourhoods, they reached the little row (*terrace* by courtesy) of pale, slightly discoloured brick; the small houses,—with one window to each story, and steep stone steps leading from the dusty road to each green door and black knocker,—all perfectly alike, save for a few bedusted geraniums here and there at a window;

otherwise distinguishable only by the numbers ; running up to twenty.

The door at which the visitors knocked was opened by a tidy, diminutive maiden, in clean white apron, and a certain lingering reminiscence of the charity-school about her whole person and demeanour.

“Please walk in, Sir,—Miss ;—Missus will be up directly.” The said Missus being at the moment busily engaged in the lower regions, superintending the preparation of the early dinner.

The front door opened into a narrow passage, with a door on one side, a neat, very narrow staircase at the opposite end, and something like a suggestion of kitchen stairs in the far distance.

“Please step in here, Miss,” pursued the little maid, opening the side-door just mentioned ; and displaying, with some official pride, the *best parlour* ; with its bright-hued Kidderminster carpet, nearly obscured by a

brown holland cloth, laid down to protect it—not from sun—the room had a north aspect; not from crumbs; no repast was ever taken in that sacred apartment;—from *what* the carpet was to be protected, careful housewives best know. Visitors were by no means so frequent as to require much precaution on the score of boots and shoes; and it is probable that, had any person attempted to enter the house without due attention to scraper and door-mat, the little maid would unhesitatingly have recalled the offender to a sense of those sacred rites of the threshold.

Clara glanced round the room;—at the glazy, light-coloured paper, spotless and cold, slightly relieved by a work of early art in floss-silk, representing Rebecca at the well;—by some of “poor Robert’s” juvenile performances, gorgeously framed; and by sundry portraits of rather grim-looking divines. She had often been there before, and was familiar with the horse-hair sofa; with the shining sideboard,

ornamented by a stuffed parrot ;—by two upright cases of knives and forks ;—by a few sad-coloured volumes, of somewhat severe evangelical divinity ; and by what seemed two immense volumes, brown, with gilt tooling, and a gold-lettered “Hist. Eng.,”—on red labels at the back ;—known to the initiated to conceal a chess and draught board under this literary seeming.

Clara half shivered, as her quick glance took in all these familiar objects.

“Oh ! cannot we go into the other room ? Where is Master Arthur ?”

And without waiting for a reply, she turned hastily from the scene of chilly splendour, and led the way to a second door, retreating from view at the dusky end of the passage ; and discoverable only by one familiar with the place.

The snug little back parlour now disclosed, showed at least some comfortable indications of human habitation ; though its only occu-

pant at the moment was Arthur, seated at the table, on which he leant his elbows, while his forehead rested on his hands, as he pored over the grotesque illustrations of an old family Bible ;—his great resource in hours of vacancy and ennui. Clara was at first almost surprised not to see him drawing, as usual ; but when the boy, at her entrance, lifted his large dark eyes from the book before him, she saw that they looked heavy, almost sleepy ; too listless and inanimate for even his favourite pursuit. A light came into them, however, as he saw who the visitors were ; he slid off his chair, and creeping timidly up to them, glided one little hand into Clara's, in a deprecating, appealing manner ; while Mr. Stretton patted the dark head good-humouredly, as he asked him, but in no inquisitorial tone, if he were “a good boy.”

Arthur seemed quite aware that no confessions were expected in answer ; he only looked up confidingly at the kindly interrogator,

while a gleam of something like boyish roguishness came into his face.

“ So grandinamma is busy ? ” said Clara.
“ We are sorry to interrupt her. ”

“ Oh ! she is always busy ; cooking, or dusting, or ironing ! She has a great deal to do — poor grandinamma ! ” sighed the boy, with something of weary pity in the simplicity of his tone.

“ And grandpapa ? ”

“ Oh, grandpapa is having his walk ;—he will be home soon, he cannot walk far. He wanted me to go with him ; but it is all so ugly here, it tires me ! ” and again the weariness came into the black eyes.

At this moment Mrs. Arleigh entered : a neat, somewhat shrunken old lady, with pale, light-blue, anxious eyes, and small faded features—on her brow the contraction of perpetual worry—of a mind narrowed by constant petty cares. It was no fault of hers, poor woman, among such cares she had lived all her

days ; and only a far stronger or more buoyant temperament could have resisted the cramping influence.

She was kind-hearted, too, and never visited upon the orphan child the additional troubles which the charge of him entailed upon her ; but she had not been cheerful before, still less could she be cheerful now ; and the child's sensitive temperament seemed to shrivel up under her care-worn glances and plaintive, harassed voice.

She came in, flushed and breathless, in a perfect agony that Mr. and Miss Stretton had been shown into the back parlour.

An uneasy consciousness of the unanswered letter, which the announcement of the visitors' name had at once recalled to her mind, added an additional shade of flurry to her habitual manner ; though she nervously avoided any allusion to the subject.

“Such a charge as I gave Nancy, Miss

Stretton, not to show any one in here ! But servants are all alike, now-a days !”

“ Indeed you must not blame Nancy ; it was all my doing,” said Clara ; “ I like this little room, it is so snug ; so I came in here of myself.”

“ Ah, you are very kind, Miss Stretton ; but it is not a place fit for such as you,—and to-day ! Why, she has left it all in a litter !” And she began a nervous attempt at “ setting things to rights.”

“ Dear Mrs. Arleigh, pray don’t worry yourself, or I shall have to run away again directly ; and I have hardly seen Arthur yet.”

“ Ah, I’m afraid you don’t find him looking very well, Miss Stretton ; I do my best for him ; but this is a dull place for a child ; and he mopes, just as poor Robert used to do. Just now his grandpapa wanted to take him out for a walk, but he wouldn’t go.”

“ Don’t you want to hear about Mabel ?” said Mr. Stretton, turning to the little fellow.

But just at this pathetic crisis in the old lady's, talk the grandfather came in. He belonged evidently to a higher grade of birth and breeding than his good old helpmate; but he was now getting infirm, and almost unbearably cross. Arthur's refusal to accompany him in his walk still rankled in his mind; and his discontent was brought to a climax at the sight of visitors, whose presence might probably occasion a delay of dinner. In *his* mind, too, the unanswered letter was uppermost, as it had been in that of his wife, until she had been reassured by Clara's frank greeting; and not knowing what had already passed, he, too, sedulously abstained from committing himself or his wife by the most remote allusion to the matter; striving to appear unembarrassed and unconscious; which effort, as usual, only resulted in peculiar stiffness and constraint.

Mr. Stretton, however, had the happy gift of *really* not seeing or understanding those

little cross gales of unpleasant feeling which upon some temperaments act with a numbing, paralyzing power, however little disposition there may be to take notice of them. Such a state of things really never occurred to his mind; if people had anything to displease them, they probably would be displeased, as he himself might be in similar cases, and pretty seriously, too; but where there was no apparent cause of annoyance, he never imagined or recognized its existence.

So, with his usual cheerful courtesy, he went on talking of Arthur, of Mabel, of the news of the day, till the atmosphere seemed lightened of a heavy load. It had been agreed between himself and his daughter, that the old couple should not be startled at first by an abrupt announcement of the real object of the visit. Clara was quite in the habit of driving over to look after Arthur, about whom she half felt herself responsible, on the strength of his belonging to Mabel; so neither Mr. nor Mrs.

Arleigh apprehended anything extraordinary from the visit.

Leaving her father to clear the way with the old people, she turned again to Arthur, and began to talk to him, by way of drawing his attention from the conversation between the elders ; yet, while mechanically exerting herself to interest the child, her own thoughts wandered, and she fell into a reverie, pondering upon the past and the future. Here, in this contracted sphere, in this prosaic atmosphere, poor Robert Arleigh had dreamed his dreams of rock and river, of beautiful forms, glowing canvas, breathing marble—of congenial intercourse, of unfading renown. He had lived to see his hopes almost realized—to feel his powers acknowledged and appreciated—to win and wed the fair and well-born Margaret Stretton—and only to end his days an obscure, disappointed, well-nigh broken-spirited man. Was such a lot reserved for Arthur, in all respects so like his father ? or

was a brighter dawn even now breaking upon the child's destinies? Was he to be, hereafter, not the struggling artist, but the envied heir of Ringwood? And — far more important question—was there indeed in that delicate artist-organization a current of the vigorous Stretton blood—to brace the over-refined temperament, and carry the fastidious, shrinking genius “straight on,” like the Stretton Flying Arrow, to its goal?

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH her mind full of these thoughts, Clara went on telling Arthur of Mabel, of the boys, of all the little family incidents which she thought might rouse and amuse him.

“ Well, Arthur,” she said at last, “ and have you no fresh drawings to show me ? nothing to tell me about what you have been reading ? ”

“ Oh ! ” the boy broke out, “ you know Mabel gave me Shakespeare’s Plays for a birthday present ; ” — (the child had, indeed, unknown to all, saved up her pocket-money for the purpose). — “ I was so fond of it, and was

trying to think how the people looked, and to make some beautiful drawings of them ; but grandpapa and grandmamma do not like me to read it ; and they have taken it away, and locked it up ; and the Arabian Nights too, which *you* gave me, you know !”

But Clara’s attention had wandered. Mr. Stretton was at last entering on the important topic ; it was impossible to avoid listening to what was being said.

“ I think,”—Mr. Stretton was beginning—
“ you received a note, a few weeks since, from my daughter ?”

“ Yes, sir — yes, certainly, we did so ; and we ought to —— I fear Miss Stretton must have thought us very neglectful ; but—”

“ Pray don’t apologize, sir ! It was rather a liberty on our part ; but my daughter thought it for the interests of the children ; however, we have now brought something to show you, which you may perhaps not have

seen, and which will explain my meaning better."

He produced the newspaper as he spoke, and quietly unfolding it, pointed out the advertisement to old Mr. Arleigh. The old man took out his spectacles, rubbed them bright, adjusted them carefully, and applied himself, in evident trepidation, to make out some alarming revelation.

"Don't alarm yourself, my good sir; it is nothing but what you will rejoice at," said Mr. Stretton, kindly. "No, not there; see, here it is."

The old lady had now come to the assistance of her husband, and was poring over his shoulder at the closely-printed page; which seemed to both a misty sea of indistinct small type, with the staring large letters of the headings and principal words glimmering ghastly forth, like breakers ahead.

Clara sprang up, and crossed the room to the little group.

“Let me read it for you;” and she gently drew the large rustling sheet out of Mr. Arleigh’s hands.

With feminine quickness, she had instantly perceived the difficulty. To her father’s masculine directness, giving the old people the newspaper to read the paragraph for themselves, had appeared the most convenient mode of possessing them fully and speedily with the matter in hand. It was more respectful, too, as his courteous instincts would have suggested; he would not himself have liked to receive an important piece of family intelligence *second-hand*.

Clara found the place in a moment, and pointed with her finger as she read—

“Margaret Arleigh, born Stretton”—

“What do they mean? What do they want with her, my dear young lady?—She is dead and gone, poor thing.”

“There can be no harm said of her, wife, living or dead,” interposed the old man.

—“ Except, indeed, that she was scarce stirring enough for a poor man’s wife.”

“ But it was only fit that my Robert should marry a lady,” said the mother. “ And she gave herself no airs ; I will say that for her. But I beg your pardon, Miss Stretton. That was her name too, poor thing.”

“ Are you talking of my mother ?—What has anybody to say of her ? Nobody ever was so good, or ever will be !”

The voice startled them all. Arthur, quite forgotten by the engrossed little party, even by Clara, had been taking in every word ; seeming to listen, less with his ears than with the dilated dark eyes, which contrasted so painfully with his colourless cheeks.

“ Hush, Arthur, dear ! No one *thinks* of saying harm of your dear mamma. It is nothing but good. She has a sister living—a great lady — who is enquiring about her and her children ; and wants to take care of them.”

And Clara finished her reading of the paragraph in the newspaper.

“And dear mamma is dead—dead!—and cannot know it! It is no use taking care of her now.”

The words broke forth in a piteous, despairing wail. Clara ran back to the boy, who had buried his face in his hands, not weeping, but in sullen, gloomy quietness.

“Arthur! your aunt has had a terrible trouble of her own! Will you not forgive her?—”

The boy looked up, awed and wondering.

“Arthur, she had one son—only one—all she thought of in this world; and he is dead.”

A strong shudder passed over the boy's whole frame but he did not speak; only the dark, eager eyes continued to question further.

“Arthur, perhaps she may have forgotten—*almost* forgotten—that she had any one else belonging to her. You know that she could

care for no one so much as for her own only son. She had lost her husband before ; only think of that, Arthur !”

“ And now ?”

“ *Now*, unless you and Mabel will love her, she has no one left to care for.”

“ I will love her very much,” said the boy, resolutely.

“ That’s my own good little Arthur,” said Clara, kissing him. “ And now, Arthur, we want to talk to grandpapa and grandmamma, about what we are to do ; how we are to tell your aunt about you, you know. Run into the garden, there is a good boy, and see if you can find me some flowers to take home with me, while we settle all about it. And stay, here is a new book, which Edward has sent for you.”

Clara could not find it in her heart to send the child away without some kindly pretext ; and she had certainly been hard pressed for one when she had recourse to the almost pal-

pable absurdity of asking for flowers from the little brick-walled square of meagre turf and dingy gravel, dignified, in the parlance of Bellevue Terrace, with the name of *garden*. Arthur seemed to think so too ; for though he offered no word in opposition, he hung back with a wistful, puzzled look, reluctant to depart upon his bootless errand, and hardly knowing what to make of her motive. The book, however, was a bright idea. She had meant to reserve it, as she generally did reserve some parting present, to cheer the little fellow when she was obliged to go away and leave him ; but she felt that this was a more critical emergency, and put forth all her forces to meet it.

The little *ruse* succeeded at once ; the boy's eyes brightened, and scarcely daring to cast a look behind, he escaped with his precious volume from the room, in evident dread lest it should be seized upon and confiscated by the way.

But Mr. and Mrs. Arleigh had at that moment more exciting thoughts to occupy their attention ; and the censure of the press, as sometimes happens in great political crises, was suffered to lie dormant. Their curiosity—rather, their real solicitude for their orphan grand-children—made them eager for further explanations with regard to the mysterious paragraph, and the immediate purport of Mr. and Miss Stretton's visit.

With her natural tact (at least where children were concerned), Clara had carefully avoided dropping, in Arthur's presence, the slightest hint as to the question of *inheritance*, which all the grown-up members of the council felt to be involved in Mrs. Stretton's enquiries for her sister's children. She knew intuitively that such a suggestion would at once, however faintly understood, close the child's heart against the relative, who, he already dimly felt, had neglected his lost mother. Only as a bereaved parent, not as

the probable dispenser of worldly prosperity, could the true child's heart be won to love, even to acknowledge her. To the elders, however, it was necessary to put the matter in its cold, hard, work-a-day-world aspect. She looked towards her father, who took the hint.

"You see, my dear madam," he began, addressing himself to Mrs. Arleigh, "that as Mrs. Stretton has recently lost her only son, she is doubtless inquiring after these children, as the next surviving of kin, with the view of placing them in their proper position, as the future representatives of the family."

Good Mrs. Arleigh did not look much enlightened.

"That is," pursued Mr. Stretton, "that these children—or Arthur at least—will now probably stand nearest in the succession to the Ringwood estate."

Mrs. Arleigh opened her eyes wide; and the old gentleman hitched his chair nearer,

and leant forward, putting up his hand to his ear, not to lose a word.

“That is,” Mr. Stretton continued, “you are, of course, in a position to prove them the children of Margaret—is not that the name?”—and he referred for a moment to the newspaper—“yes, Margaret Stretton, Mrs. Stretton’s sister. You can, of course, produce the usual evidence, to establish the fact of your son’s marriage?”

“Yes, of course—I believe so—to whom did you say, sir?” asked the old man, hesitating.

“Why—to Margaret Stretton—to be sure! that is right, is it not? Surely there has been no mistake? It was Margaret Stretton, was it not, whom your son married?”

“Why, yes, certainly—that was the name.”

“Mrs. Stretton’s sister, of course. That is all right, is it not?”

Mr. Stretton was growing a little impatient.

“We never troubled ourselves about whose

sister she was. She was staying with some friends in London, where my son used to visit ; real high gentry, somewhere at the West End. Poor Robert was made enough of then among the great folks !” concluded the old lady, with her customary plaintive intonation.

“ And it was at their house that Mr. Arleigh—Mr. Robert Arleigh—met Miss Margaret Stretton ?” said Clara, coming to the rescue, as she perceived that there was little chance of the conversation, in its present style, resulting in any satisfactory explanation between the parties.

“ Yes, indeed, ma’am ; and the wedding was from their house too. They made no little of her, poor thing, and no wonder ; for a sweet young creature she was ; and not a bit of pride about her ;—worshipped her husband, as one may say, and thought none like him ; for all her sister—Miss Stretton that was then—might look down on the match. A proud young lady she was, as we heard tell ; for we

never saw her. My poor boy had a high spirit of his own, and was above paying court to one who looked down on him. And she thought none good enough to be her own husband, they say ; though I suppose she did get married after all, as she had a son, you tell us, ma'am. But it is the first I ever heard of it."

Clara saw that they were on the right track. Her quick penetration had helped her to a guess at the cause of the old couple's perplexity and reluctance.—It came out by degrees.

Their son had always kept it secret that his wife had been a Miss Stretton of Ringwood ; he was too proud to claim kindred with a family who looked down on him and his. He had never even sent them word when poor Margaret died ; it was away in Wales, so they might never have heard of it !—

"But now," said Mr. Stretton, "these children seem to be the only heirs to the pro-

perty. It would not be right to keep them out of their inheritance. Of course you can give all necessary proofs that they really are what they claim to be?" And he proceeded to question the old people more in detail.

There was no difficulty in the case. They knew perfectly well the church in which their son had been married, and the children baptized; and there were plenty of old neighbours who had known the children, on and off, to that day.

It was evident there was nothing to prevent Mr. Stretton from putting himself in immediate communication with the solicitors to whom reference had been given in the advertisement. He, as well as Clara, left the old people with many kind and re-assuring auguries and promises.

Clara had brought with her a large basket of choice fruit and vegetables; so the little household was on the whole rather cheered, though greatly startled, by the visit.

CHAPTER IX.

IN the evening, the whole matter was talked over with Edward, who had roused himself, with some effort, from his half-reluctant apathy, and now threw himself into the affair with the determined energy which he always displayed in what really interested him. In such cases, his impetuosity even exceeded Clara's, though far less easily excited.

The next day, father and son called together at the lawyer's chambers, and put matters in train. There was nothing intricate in the story of Mabel's and Arthur's parentage.

Margaret Stretton, while staying with some friends in London, had become acquainted with Mr. Arleigh, whose early promise made him sought in the first circles. Poor Margaret's previous life had been spent amid the wearing, grinding cares which attend narrow means, when combined with considerable social pretensions. To her, young Arleigh's true artist-temperament, knowing and thinking so little of such things, was refreshing as running water in summer drought. He was easily won by her undisguised sympathy and appreciation; and they were married from the house of the friends with whom Margaret was staying. She had no one whose opinion she was bound to consult; her sister, her only relation, beheld the marriage coldly and disapprovingly, but with no fear for Margaret's personal comfort. It was unanimously pronounced that Mr. Arleigh must rise high in his profession.

Why these auguries were never realized;

whether from mere want of good fortune, or from a deficiency in those subordinate qualities which alone can insure for genius worldly success, who can decide? Of his genius itself, those who *knew* him never doubted; why was he so little known? In that genius his devoted wife gloried and revelled, even when poverty pressed hardest on her and her children.

For a time, the sisters exchanged letters occasionally. When Mrs. Stretton became mistress of their old home, she sent an even affectionate invitation to Margaret, to visit her there, with her husband and children. This invitation, however, was coldly and proudly declined by Mr. Arleigh, who had never shaken off the impression that his Margaret's marriage with *him* was considered a degradation. From that time, the correspondence languished. Margaret still wrote now and then; announcing generally the birth or death of a child (Mabel and Arthur were the last survivors of a numerous family). Then Mrs. Stretton

became absorbed in care for her husband's health, and scarcely answered ; when in her turn she began to wonder at not hearing, a report reached her, that Mr. Arleigh had gone abroad ; to study, doubtless. Soon came Colonel Stretton's death ; and her engrossing devotion to her boy for a time absorbed all other interests in her mind. She took for granted that the Arleighs were still wandering on the continent ; revelling in Rome, Florence, or Dresden ; and losing, in the intoxication of artistic enjoyment, almost the very remembrance of home ties. Far indeed was she from guessing how the disappointed man had shut himself up with his poverty in a remote Welsh cottage ; earning a bare subsistence for himself and family by the views which he occasionally sold, or the portraits which he now and then received a commission to paint, but abandoning, with the infatuation of despair, all hopes of rising in his profession. He especially avoided claiming kindred with his

wife's relations, by giving them intimation of her death ; and when his own end approached, he enjoined on his parents, that no appeal should be made to Mrs. Stretton on behalf of his children.

It was this strong feeling on his part which had made him shrink from the attentions of Mr. Stretton and his family, till positively assured by his wife that they had no connection with her own. When Mabel was one day invited to visit them, he had said, half playfully—

“Now don't take any fancies into your little head, because their name is the same as dear mamma's used to be ; they are no cousins of yours, so don't fancy it yourself, or make them fancy it.”

And Mrs. Arleigh had afterwards added the injunction—

“Don't say anything about my old name, dear ; papa does not like it talked of.”

These were the prohibitions which had

dwelt in Mabel's memory, and had made her so long silent on the subject.

When Mr. Stretton's family, in their second Welsh tour, again sought the artist's cottage, they found only old Mr. and Mrs. Arleigh in charge of the house and children. The old people had been summoned to their son's death-bed, and had remained, with a sort of helpless fidelity, watching over what he had left behind. Clara's eager entreaty on behalf of Mabel, and Mr. Stretton's offer to purchase the pictures, the only property of any value in the cottage, enabled the old people to return to their humble home near London, and to take charge of Arthur with tolerable comfort. It had been no small joy to Mabel that her father's pictures, instead of being dispersed among strangers, should be removed to where she would herself be able to see them. She had been old enough to watch and delight in the progress of his pencil, and knew by heart all the sketches and paintings

with which the small, scantily-furnished cottage was crowded: views of mountains and waterfalls, scenes from almost every well-known poet, fanciful suggestions of the artist's own imagination,—in every stage of forwardness, from slight pencil outlines to highly-finished cabinet paintings in oil. The latter, however, were few in number, and the marketable value of the whole collection would probably have been but small, as Mr. Arleigh was so little known, and his powers, though above the average, lay rather in conception than execution. Mr. Stretton, notwithstanding, or rather in consequence of, his natural good taste, rarely purchased pictures; taking little pleasure in any but the very best, which were wholly out of his reach. In the present case, therefore, he was actuated merely by pity for the bereaved family, and by the pleasure of gratifying Edward and Clara, both of whom resembled their mother in their love and appreciation of works of art. In

Clara, especially, it was a strongly-marked taste.

Mrs. Stretton's heart probably smote her when she heard the death, in something like penury, of the sister whom she had so long almost forgotten ; when she found that to *strangers* that sister and her children had been indebted for every alleviation of their lot. But she went into the matter with her usual business-like calmness and acuteness, with no expression whatever of personal feeling ; merely intimating, when the parentage of the children was established to her satisfaction, her desire to take them wholly under her own charge, pledging herself to provide for them entirely. The question of *inheritance* was left open ; Ringwood being unreservedly at Mrs. Stretton's own disposal. The lawyers, however, hinted that her present view was to place Arthur precisely in the same position which her own son would have occupied. The name being the same, appeared to weigh

much with her in the matter. Both sisters had, very naturally, given their father's name to their sons.

Some time was of course occupied in correspondence; but Mrs. Stretton was urgent that, as soon as the necessary preliminaries had been gone through, both children should be at once sent to Ringwood, which was henceforth to be entirely their home.

"Perhaps you won't like parting with them," said Clara to Mr. and Mrs. Arleigh; "we would promise still to take care of Mabel, if you like that better; and perhaps Mrs. Stretton would do something for Arthur, without taking him from you."

The old people hesitated.

"Well, ma'am," said the grandmother, "we're getting old now to have a child about us; and the boy looks puny, and might be better cared for at Ringwood."

"And you're main good to Mabel," said the old man; "but ye'd tire of her by-and-

bye, maybe. They'd better go at once to them whose business it is to take care of them, while they are in the mind."

So Mabel was summoned from school, and all preparations put forward for her departure; Mrs. Stretton having intimated that, as soon as the necessary arrangements could be made, she would send her house-keeper to take charge of the children to Ringwood.

When Mabel was first informed of the change in her prospects, she showed no surprise; but murmuring, with her peculiar nod of the head, "Yes, I know," put her arms round Clara, and held her so tight and long, that it seemed as if she could never let her go.

"Clara," she said at last, looking searchingly into her face, "won't you think me very ungrateful if I am *glad*?"

"Not a bit, Mab; I am glad myself."

"I know," pursued Mabel, half thinking

aloud, "that I shall see very little of any of you for some time."

"Yes," said Clara, stoutly, "it can't be."

"But I shall be grown up very soon; the time will pass quickly."

"Mabel," said Clara, "you know very well that we won't go there, and that your aunt will not trust you with us. Don't try, it will do no good. You will be quite happy meanwhile, and by-and-bye all will come straight."

"Yes," said Mabel, "and then you *are* relations, that is quite certain; and if I can make out the rights of it, while I am there, I can send for you to come."

"Do so, little witch."

* * * * *

And while all these new interests were pending in Mr. Stretton's household, Dr. Harland, one summer's evening, brought back his children from their pleasant country drive

and game of romps in Mr. Stretton's pretty garden, to their stately, forlorn-looking London home. His aspect was certainly not that of a disappointed man ; and yet he had so far no tangible success to boast of.

Clara had made up her mind, from a mere girl, that a step-mother she never would become ; that she hated the idea of the suspicions and animadversions to which such a position might expose her ; and that, in fact, she had been plagued enough already with the charge, so early thrown upon her, of her own tiresome little brothers (the delight of her heart, and main interest of her life ; as all who knew Clara Stretton, knew full well).—That, having been thus tormented, she would take good care not to involve herself voluntarily in duties equally burdensome, and far more obnoxious to criticism and interference. All this she had resolved, and plainly avowed, from the time when she had been old enough to have an opinion on the subject. And

having thus thought and spoken, thus irrevocably committed herself,—was Clara Stretton one to retract her opinion, or weakly to allow herself to be beguiled out of her deliberate judgment? She might pity and long to foster the motherless little children—she might feel, as she would have scorned to avow to herself, that a look or a word from the father could shake even her resolute will—the more reason for keeping firm, and not making herself ridiculous.

Dr. Harland was a man of shrewd, subtle insight ; accustomed to read with kindly but penetrating eye the many self-delusions with which his profession constantly required him to cope. Clara's brief note of refusal had not dismayed him ; and now, without having received one word of direct encouragement, he returned home a happy and hopeful man. He had had tact enough to allow her to believe herself unyielding ; had spared her all necessity of *committing herself* ; in fact, had quietly

assumed her decision as irrevocable with regard to himself; and had merely appealed to her kindly feelings in behalf of his little orphans. To see children sickly, dull, or neglected, was just what Clara could not bear;—and she, perhaps for this very reason, shrank from involving herself in responsibilities which her own heart told her would be with her no mere formal obligations.

But she entered with great zeal, and in entire simplicity, into all the plans for their health and pleasure, on which the father, with admirable diplomacy, sedulously consulted her. Two of her strongest instincts were thereby called into play. She delighted in children, and she delighted to have some one or something to take care of, to manage for. Then, the house was not like itself without children; it seemed but half furnished,—and the two boys were rapidly growing out of childhood, and would probably be less and less at home; and Mabel and Arthur would be soon out of

reach : carried quite away, beyond sight or knowledge. Her father would be quite dull—*he* was so fond of children, and had been so long accustomed to have them about him. For herself, of course, she was heartily tired of the trouble ;—but for his sake—just to keep him amused and cheerful—it would really be a comfort to have Dr. Harland's little girls now and then to stay there. She should be in no way responsible, and could send them home whenever her patience was exhausted. So, “just to please papa,” she might put up with them now and then !

CHAPTER X.

LITTLE as the family desired it, some particulars of their kindness to Mabel had necessarily oozed out in the course of the elaborate business correspondence. One day, after all had been arranged with regard to the children, Mr. Stretton received an envelope, deeply edged with black, and sealed with a tiny crest. The enclosed note, in a clear, elegant hand, ran as follows :—

“ Mrs. Stretton, of Ringwood Chace, begs to express her deep obligations for the generous kindness shown to her young relative ;

her recent loss must plead her excuse for not calling to tender her acknowledgments in person. Nor dare she risk giving offence by offering remuneration for the *money value* of the services rendered to Mabel. Would her niece's friends, however, honour Mrs. Stretton by visiting the Chace? She leaves time and mode to their own convenience, only requesting to be favoured with a previous intimation."

"You will like that, my girl," said Mr. Stretton; "you wanted to see the old place."

"Oh no, papa!" said Clara, vehemently; "go *there* in *that* way! It is the last thing I could endure."

"Very well, just as you please, my dear; only I thought you would enjoy it."

"You couldn't go, Edward, could you?"

"I should think not," was Edward's only reply.

"How oddly she gets out of the difficulty about our being namesakes!" remarked Clara,

soon afterwards, when her father had left the room.

“Yes, I noticed that,” said Edward. “You see she never uses our name at all, that she may not own to its being the same as hers.”

So a note was written to Mrs. Stretton, courteous and guarded as her own; the two “*Strettons*,” however, being therein studiously brought into juxtaposition.

And Clara, who piqued herself upon keeping up her own spirits, and those of everybody else, hurried forward the preparations for Mabel’s departure. It was difficult, however, to put her heart into the business. Indeed, a dulness seemed to have fallen upon the house, at the prospect of losing Mabel, for, at least, an indefinite period.

“Just after you have had all the trouble with her, ma’am,” said Nurse; “I think those who have never troubled themselves about her before, have no business to take her away now,

just when she was beginning to be a little orderly and pleasant-like.”

Meanwhile, a rather doleful process had to be gone through, on poor little Mabel's part, among the many doleful preparations which must ever precede departure. Old Mr. and Mrs. Arleigh, with excellent right, stipulated that their granddaughter should spend with them some short period—a week, or thereabouts—before she should be finally consigned to Mrs. Stretton's charge. Now, Mabel really loved the old people, who had never failed in their devoted and self-sacrificing kindness to the orphan children, thrown as so heavy a weight upon their struggling old age. Even since they had been relieved from the main responsibility with regard to Mabel, they had still strained their slender means, that they might retain the feeling of their son's child not being wholly dependent on strangers—not wholly taken out of their hands. All this Mabel had keenly, even painfully, appreciated.

She clung, too, to her father's parents with the peculiar feeling that they were her only relations—the only two persons in the wide world on whom she and her little brother had the claim of blood. Whether she at any time very much liked *staying* with them, was another question. Yet she probably would have done so, but for the firm persuasion, on their part, that she *must* miss and pine for the indulgences of her adopted home—that she must dislike their homely way of living. Now, in point of fact, the buoyant, high-spirited little girl required only ordinary kindness to make her happy anywhere ; the small discomforts, the subdued, sombre tone of her grandfather's home, would have had far less power to depress her animated spirits, than they exercised upon the delicate, morbidly-sensitive boy, whose entire life was passed in that murky atmosphere. But the old people were used to Arthur, and wholly obtuse in their perceptions as far as he was concerned. So,

instead of sparing *him* any of the small grating annoyances of narrow means, they allowed him, without compunction, to take his chance ; while, with an equal want of judgment, they were perpetually drawing Mabel's attention to whatever was amiss ; and overwhelming her with shame and confusion by something very like *apologies* for what her pre-occupied imagination might have *float*ed *her over*, unconscious of externals, in the brightness of her own dreams.

Thus, despite the pleasure of being with Arthur, she had always dreaded one of these visits ; and now, it was not only dull, but sad. Theoretically, she was the favourite grand-child ; she had been to the old people only a holiday recreation, not a daily and hourly burden. So Mrs. Arleigh, when the notion was once clearly brought home to her mind that this was in all probability the little girl's last visit ; that she was henceforth to reside far away, at that awful and inaccessible Ring-

wood, under the control of that haughty, disdainful Mrs. Stretton who had scorned her poor Robert, began really to fancy that the chief happiness of her dreary life was about to be taken from her; forgetting how very little she had seen, or cared to see, of Mabel, when she had her within reach. Gladly would she now have retracted, and prevailed on her husband to retract, the consent so readily given; but it was too late. Mr. Arleigh was immovable; and it was quite certain that Mrs. Stretton would be equally so. Even Clara, having had her spontaneous offer declined, felt no inclination to interfere further with what had been already arranged; or to stand between the children and the brighter future which seemed opening upon them. So poor Mrs. Arleigh moved with a more weary step than ever through her ceaseless household employments; the tears, which she hardly ever paused to wipe away, bathing her small pale face; mournful ejaculations about "poor Robert,"

or "that it should come to this," interrupting, at frequent intervals, her orders and reproofs to Nancy, and her querulous replies to Mabel's attempts at intercourse.

"Indeed, dear grandmamma, I shall always love you; I shall think of you very often; and I dare say my aunt will let us come and see you," Mabel every now and then repeated, in a vain endeavour to stay the ever-flowing tears. She was used to the strong-hearted Strettons, who would have smiled, and probably jested, though their hearts had been breaking; and her grandmother's ceaseless outpouring of woe filled her with terrified sympathy, probably disproportioned to the actual suffering on Mrs. Arleigh's part.

"Don't talk nonsense, poor child! you will soon be taught to look down upon your old grandfather and grandmother; and we shall never see or hear anything more of you. Trust Mrs. Stretton for that! She looked down upon my poor boy; so what must she

think of his old father and mother ? Ah ! to think it should come to this with poor Robert's children !”

“ Grandmamma is always going on in that way !” interrupted Arthur, as Mabel was renewing her attempts at consolation.

He had a boy's impatience of feminine laments ; and he was a little hardened, by constant use, to his grandmother's desponding temperament ; so that he was better able than Mabel to estimate her plaintive speeches at their real amount of significance. Yet he looked rather blank, when Clara, punctual to the day appointed, hurried Mabel away ; cutting short, with kindly firmness, the protracted leave-taking ; and left him to bear the brunt of the next few weeks unsupported by his sister's presence. There was no help for it ; the old people very reasonably insisted on retaining him to the last ; while Mabel, could she even have been longer spared, would have been utterly overwhelmed, depressed beyond

even *her* rallying power, if left longer in an atmosphere so different from that which she habitually breathed. Clara was sorry for Arthur; but was obliged to leave him to his fate. Her decided character never permitted her to vacillate between incompatible claims. So, with a cheery "Good-bye, Arthur! I shall send for you in good time, you know; so grandmamma must make much of you," she carried off the lingering Mabel; and in obedience to her quick sign, the carriage drove rapidly from the door. There was at least one consolation for him—grandmamma and grandpapa would not be nearly so sorry to part with *him* as with Mabel.

CHAPTER XI.

“MABEL,” said Clara, one morning, “what must we do about your father’s pictures? You know, though papa took them, because your grandpapa had no room for them, we have always considered them really yours, and have only kept them in trust for you. Would you not like to take some of them with you? —the small drawings, at any rate?”

The two were busily packing in Clara’s morning-room, where some especial favourites among the pictures had been collected.

“You must keep them for me still, Clara

dear—at least for the present. I *could* not take his drawings with me to *Ringwood*, you know, where no one would care for them ;” and she coloured painfully, with something of pride and jealous affection in her look.

“Thank you, dear ; we will be very careful of them. I am really glad you don’t want them yet ; we should not know how to part with them — *your* portrait especially,” she added, laughing, glancing at a picture over the chimney-piece.

It was certainly no portrait of Mabel, though some slight resemblance to her might, perhaps, be *fancied*, rather than *traced* in it. The style was that of Sir Godfrey Kneller ; and the original, which Mr. Arleigh had met with in some old farm-house, and copied on account of some imagined resemblance to his wife, was probably the work of that master. The costume was that of his period—a transition between the loose, fantastic drapery of the second Charles’s reign and the stiff prim-

ness of a later time. The hair was loosely looped up, not unmercifully strained; the pale green silk, close-clinging rather than tight-fitting, without sharply-defined edges or distinct divisions, resembled rather the calyx of a flower than the handiwork of a seamstress; and suited well the fair young girl, sweet-looking and graceful, rather than beautiful, whom the portrait represented.

“What nonsense to call it my portrait, Clara! You know it is not a bit like me.”

“Not much, certainly. There is a little look of you, which is no wonder, as it resembled your mamma; and Edward always says you will grow up just like it. But you know very well you will never be half so pretty.”

“Of course not,” said Mabel, in an absent way, as she stood looking at the picture. “Oh, Clara!” she continued, “if you only knew how pretty mamma was—before you ever saw her—when papa thought her so like

this picture. You must take great care of it, and send it to me whenever I want it."

"That we will, dear. Meantime it will put us in mind of you."

"Ah!" said Mabel, "but if you look at that picture, and begin to fancy me like it, when you see me again, you will be—"

"I must manage to like you, as I do now, without knowing whether you are pretty or not," said Clara. "And now, Mab, we have no time to lose."

Whether Mabel was pretty, was indeed an open question. She was continually called so, from a certain brightness and changefulness of tint in hair, eyes, and complexion; but all this depended so entirely on the chance of the moment, that those who had applied the epithet to her one day, often found themselves puzzled, if called upon to justify it the next.

Respecting her eyes, indeed, public opinion was tolerably unanimous; though strangers were now and then puzzled as to their *colour*,

while those who knew her well freely confessed that they were "only grey;" but nearly all agreed in calling them beautiful: *wonderful*, was the usual expression; their beauty being of that indefinable character which gives the idea of some distinct conscious existence, or of an actual looking forth of the spirit within. But with this exception, the child, though interesting, would not generally have been considered striking; her shy, reserved ways prevented chance observers from even perceiving the varied play of expression, which was her principal charm. Only Edward, catching at her slight occasional likeness to the portrait, persisted in regarding *that* as a fore-shadowing of her future self;—an ideal of loveliness and grace, far surpassing, in his imagination, all that he had yet met with in actual life.

But, as Clara said, there was no time to lose; and she and Mabel continued busy for several hours; they hardly knew how long;

till they were startled by Edward's voice beneath the windows.

“Mab ! Mab ! come down quickly ! I want you.”

She was off like a bird, down the broad staircase, and in the garden in a minute.

Edward was holding in his hand a beautiful little pine-tree, of a rare species, just then introduced into this country.

“You know I promised you a tree, in the place of that which Bess destroyed. You are going away now ; but I have brought you one notwithstanding ; and I want you to plant it,”—he went on, hurrying her along the garden path as he spoke,—“as a token that you will come back to us when you can.”

They had now reached her little garden ; where a hole had been already dug, and all preparations made. It only remained for Mabel to lift the tree into its place, and fix it firmly there. Taking it from Edward, she knelt down, and began filling in the earth

around the roots, while he steadied the spiry top in an upright position.

“In token,” said Mabel, pressing the earth firmly down with her ungloved hands, “that when I come back I shall find you in this same place.”

“Where else should you find us?” said Edward, laughing; “because you are spirited away yourself, you expect the same thing to happen to other people.”

“You might take a fancy to go somewhere else,” said Mabel, “but no other place would ever seem so right for you; at any rate, I do not think I should like any so well.”

“I should not easily like one better,” said Edward, glancing almost proudly around. It was, indeed, a fair, home-like scene; the large afternoon shadows of the trees flung broad and cool upon the undulations of lawn and meadow; at a little distance, the flower-beds, in their autumnal blaze of the most gorgeous hues; the glittering dome of the conservatory,

just catching the eye, over thickets of arbutus, bay, and laurel; the long lines of tastefully-curtained windows giving back the level sunlight.

"I was born here," Edward went on; "Clara was not; I suppose *that* sometimes makes a difference. And our mother died here; and we have all been so happy here together," he concluded, somewhat incoherently.

Mabel had risen, and was standing in contemplation of her finished work; trying every now and then to rub the dirt off her hands, which were neither whiter nor more taper than is usual at her age.

"Well, Mab, what are you thinking of? I promise you that if you do not find us here, it shall be no fault of mine."

"I was thinking of something so curious, which I was reading the other day, about planting trees; about estates being claimed in that way. I mean, when the heir came into possession, he always planted a tree as a sign

that the land was his ; and if the true heir had been kept out of his rights, as soon as he knew about it, the first thing he did was to go and plant a tree on the land, as a sign that he claimed it. And you know, Edward, perhaps yours is an older branch of the Strettons ; I daresay it is ; so do try and find out about it ; and if you do, you must come to Ringwood and plant a tree there ; and we should be so glad ! Just think, to have you and Clara for cousins, and living at the Chace !”

“ So that is what your little head is running upon !” said Edward, taking up one of her long curls, and twining it round and round his fingers. “ All very fine for you, Miss Mabel ! but what would Arthur say to it, I wonder ?—for, of course, Ringwood is to be his.”

“ Oh, Edward ! Arthur would be so glad ! you know he would ! And besides, that will be only when my aunt dies ; and she will live

a great while longer, I hope ; she is not at all old. So it will make no difference in that way ;—but to have you for cousins’—

“ We may be *cousins*, without being the elder branch, you know. And I wish we were, Mab ; or else we shall see little enough of you, depend upon it. But what an inconsistent little woman you are ; first making me promise to live here, and then wishing that we might come and live at the Chace !—but never mind, dear,” seeing her look puzzled ;—“ if we were proved to be the elder branch fifty times over, I should never come to plant my tree on the land. You know I have my own inheritance, and must stand by it.”

Mabel looked inquiringly.

“ My grandfather told me that he trusted the business to me ; that it was the family estate for *us* Strettons, and that we must not give it up for any other ;—that *his* father, who began life as a poor boy, left it as an independent inheritance to his children, and to their

children after them, if we were not enticed from it."

Mabel stood thoughtfully intent.

"I would not give it up, Mab; and I couldn't be Stretton of Ringwood Chace at the same time. I was at a school once, where the boys were all sons of officers, baronets, country gentlemen, and that class. Of course I was asked at once, as boys always do ask each other, about my home and my father. I was proud enough of both, and bragged of them stupidly enough, I daresay—and then the fellows turned round and cut me for being a tradesman's son. Disagreeable enough, Mab, I can tell you, though it sounds absurd stuff now! No joke at all at the time! I was fool enough to be vexed at first,—didn't like it one bit. However, one can't be made ashamed of one's own father, you know; so no harm was done. I was only there one half; I should have been fighting half my time, and learning nothing; so it would have been no

good ; they taught me one lesson, however.— But we need not trouble ourselves ; I am never likely to have the choice in this matter, Mabel.” He had been walking backwards and forwards on the turf ; but now, turning suddenly round, came and stood beside her. “ Mabel ! you have planted *your* tree on *our* ground ; promise me—” he stopped short. “ It would be a shame ! such a mere child !” he muttered to himself. “ Mab !” he exclaimed, “ there is the first bell ringing ! Run in as fast as you can, or you won’t be ready for dinner ; and Clara will scold,” he added, laughing.

“ Please, sir,” said Mabel, next morning, at breakfast, to Mr. Stretton, “ won’t you take me with you to London, some day before I go ?—if you do not mind letting me, Edward. I do so want to see the old place again, before I leave.”

“ To be sure, my dear ; you can go to-day, if you please, while it is fine. You will be in time to catch the coach, Edward, will you not ?”

—looking at his watch. “You had better put on your bonnet, my dear, if you have done breakfast.”

It had been one of the festivals of Mabel's childhood, when Edward occasionally gave up to her his place beside his father in the gig, and she was permitted to accompany Mr. Stretton up to London. Latterly, however, she had seemed too old for scrambling up and down ladders, and through trap doors, which had formerly been her delight, when allowed, under Edward's guidance, to explore the great rambling warehouses ; and Clara, not being quite certain how far her sense of dignity had kept pace with her years, had wisely kept her out of temptation. Now, however, Mabel's plea was irresistible ; and she enjoyed the expedition with all the glee of childhood. It was so exhilarating to find herself once more seated by Mr. Stretton, who chatted cheerfully on every passing object, or exchanged greetings with the many acquaintances, bound, like him-

self, to the Great City, whom he overtook on the way. It was so pleasant, nestling close to her kind and cordial companion, to be borne swiftly, without an effort, through the fresh morning air; to see the old river, with its forests of masts;—the wide array of towers and steeples, emerging from the smoke-cloud to confront them, as they crossed the bridge. She enjoyed the bustling, noisy labyrinth of broad and narrow thoroughfares, through which they drove to the warehouse door; the deference with which the old servants of the firm came out to assist “the young lady” down; even the peculiar smell of straw and brown paper which met her as she entered;—still more, when Mr. Stretton, seated on his high leather stool, in the dusky counting-house, was absorbed in the letters and newspaper of the day, did she enjoy the *scramble* (in a modified form) with which Edward managed to indulge her; so scrupulously, however, as would have satisfied Clara herself.

She was desperately tired at the end ; so tired as scarcely to utter a word during the drive home. Her first impulse, on arrival, was, however, to dart through the hall, and out upon the breezy lawn, where the trees were lazily opening and shutting their great masses of foliage ; revealing, with every pulsation, a whole world of green arbours and labyrinths among the recesses of the boughs. She drew a deep breath, murmuring to herself, "How pleasant it is to be out in the country again !"

After dinner, being missed, she was discovered fast asleep on a sofa ; there she remained all the evening, and could with difficulty be roused when it was time to go to bed.

CHAPTER XII.

THIS was Mabel's last holiday ;—her departure was nearer at hand than she dreamed of. For Clara, a vowed enemy to the pathetic in every form, managed to keep all particulars a profound secret till the time had absolutely arrived. Even then, she skilfully availed herself of the bustle of preparation, of which she made the very most, to occupy every spare moment ; and hurried Mabel off at last, unexpectedly, in a sort of surprise, which left little time for leave taking, and none at all for thanks.

There was, indeed, plenty of necessary bustle. Arthur came to Mr. Stretton's a few days before, to be ready to start with his sister. Clara and her father undertook to accompany them up to town in the morning, to meet the coach; and Mrs. Stretton's housekeeper, who had come up to London the previous day, was to sleep at the coach inn, and take charge of the two children back with her to Ringwood. And Clara was right glad to be a little behindhand (no common case where she was concerned), that she might the more quickly loosen Mabel's clinging clasp of her neck, and the sooner lose sight of her wistful face as the coach dashed off.

The first part of the journey was dull and almost silent. Mabel, despite her "gladness," had cried so much the night before, that this morning she could scarcely open her eyes; certainly she could scarcely see with them. So she leant back in a corner of the coach,

and soon fell into a heavy, half-conscious doze. Arthur, indeed, was not particularly sad ; his grandparents, though kind in the main, were too infirm and petulant to win much of a child's affection ; and they had been too unfeignedly glad to have him otherwise provided for, to make the parting, on his side at least, a very sorrowful one. But his shyness of the strange housekeeper predominated over all other feelings ; and with one hand in Mabel's, as a sort of protection, he sat looking out of the window next him ; at first, only to avoid meeting the housekeeper's eye ; but soon in absorbed delight at the objects passing before him in quick variety.

The housekeeper, a hard-featured, light-complexioned woman of forty, neatly and primly dressed in deep mourning, had every wish either to show kindness to them as two children, or respectful attention as "the young lady and gentleman ;" but she had not been

long enough with Mrs. Stretton to feel any peculiar interest in the family ; and was, besides, tired, sleepy, and half-cross, from her previous day's journey, and noisy night at the inn. So, after a few civil inquiries and offers of accommodation, she, like Mabel, soon fell asleep ; till both were suddenly roused by an enthusiastic exclamation from Arthur, as a wide reach of glassy river came in view, all a-blaze with orange-tinted beech-trees, which crowded close down on its margin, and were reflected far below in its depths, like a sunset.

Mabel quickly sat forward, rubbing her eyes. The fresh autumn breeze had imperceptibly bathed away the stiffness and heat from her eyelids, and the beauty of the scene burst on her like a vision. It was a true English day ; brilliant and glittering, yet with a faint haze just hanging on the skirts of the transparent sky, and a certain dreamy softness

mingled in the half-frosty air. Mabel was instantly in her own wild spirits ; bewildering Arthur by calling his attention to one beautiful effect or quaint object after another, while he was painfully considering how each one could best be represented ;—bewildering the housekeeper by rapid questions about Ringwood ;—“ were there deer ? were there wild rabbits, squirrels, &c. &c. &c. ?—was there plenty of flowers ?—plenty of rough walks ? ” Her native instinct of delicacy prevented her questioning the servant as to her mistress, or the family concerns, ways, and doings ; and the good woman was too phlegmatic to drop by the way many suggestive hints. (From any reference to the recent bereavement, both parties seemed by tacit understanding to shrink.) So the housekeeper met Mabel’s torrent of questions with a blank wall of the baldest, barest statements ; very often with—“ I really can’t say, Miss ; I never thought to notice ; ”

till Mabel gradually relapsed into silence, but not into sleep. Her cheek glowed, her eyes and parted lips smiled, as she sat looking before her into the gathering twilight, evidently hearing and seeing nothing external.

The regular coach-stoppage for dinner had occurred in the midst of Mabel's lively mood ; so, while looking quiet and grave, as she always did in the presence of strangers, she had been the whole time whispering to Arthur comical suggestions, till his child-like look and manner returned, as they never failed to do under the influence of her merriment ; and for some time after they were again seated in the coach, and after Mabel had subsided into her waking sleep, he was chattering boyishly to the housekeeper, of his doings, hopes, and plans ; and winning from her good graces the character of "such a nice young gentleman," under which she that evening described him in the servants' hall at the Chace.

Ringwood was now not far distant. At the nearest market-town, the carriage was waiting for them. There was a short, dark drive ; then a sudden swing through the lodge-gates, which were open in readiness ; the little lodge windows sparkling with a cheerful light. Then never-ending trees ; great firs especially, which threw swaying shadows across the road, as the moon began to struggle through the clouds. Then a startling stop before the carved stone porch ; and a broad glow streaming out through the open door.

The air felt chill and foggy as they alighted. The next moment they were in the warm, snug hall ; long and low, rather narrow in proportion to its length ; lighted by an odd-looking chandelier, of bright brass, hanging from a ceiling wrought in panels and heraldic devices.

“Is Mrs. Stretton in her own room?” asked the housekeeper of the old-fashioned serving-man who had opened the door.

“ Yes, to be sure,” was his reply, as he led them down a matted passage running at right angles from the farther end of the hall. Opening a door, he announced—“ The young lady and gentleman, please, ma’am.”

It was a large room, very plainly furnished ; the walls lined with shelves and drawers. A small bronze lamp hung from the ceiling ; under it was a large table, covered with papers ; at which, in the full light, Mrs. Stretton was sitting, seemingly engrossed in business. The rest of the room was in a kind of twilight ; a fire burnt dull at the farther end.

Mrs. Stretton rose as they entered, and met them at the door. She shook hands with the children, scarcely looking at them ; and put a few brief questions to the housekeeper, ascertaining that the journey had been safe and comfortable.

She was still a handsome woman ; tall, fair, and stately, with high aquiline features. The

hazel eyes, since her boy's death, occasionally looked dim, with secret tears, perhaps, or sleepless nights; or the overstrained labour with which she kept her sorrow at bay. But her profusion of crisp light hair, scarcely tinged with grey, could hardly be restrained under her close mourning cap.

“You must be tired now, my dears; so I won't keep you. Jones,”—to the house-keeper, — “show Miss Mabel and — her brother,—up to their rooms. Supper is ready for them, as soon as they have refreshed themselves.”

She sat down to her papers. Mrs. Jones led Mabel and Arthur back into the hall, and upstairs into a kind of gallery, not very wide, and interrupted by steps up and down, and occasional sharp turnings.

“This is your room, Miss; and here is Master Arthur's, you see, nearly opposite.”

Mabel just glanced into the spacious

chamber, with its blazing fire, which had been pointed out as her own ; and then crossed over, to install Arthur in his domicile. Arthur's room was, as the housekeeper had expressed it, "nearly opposite" his sister's ; but was just round one of those odd little twists in the gallery, of which there were so many. Mabel liked the look of it at once : a thorough boy's room ;—the little white bed wedged close to the end wall, leaving large free space between it and the window ; an old table, that could not be spoilt, standing clear in the middle ; hanging shelves for books ; plenty of cupboard room for a boy's innumerable valuables. A fire had been lighted in the little corner grate of this room also, in honour of the long journey, then no small event.

A respectable elderly woman came forward.

"Missus thought the young gentleman hadn't been used to do for himself, perhaps," explained the housekeeper ; "so she said that

Martha, the housemaid, who does for her what she wants, had better see to him."

"But, Arthur, darling, I can help you," exclaimed Mabel; and she lingered in the room, unpacking and assisting at intervals, till Arthur, who seemed growing quite at home, begged her to go and take off her bonnet, to be ready for supper; he was so hungry.

So Mabel, making a threatening gesture at him, went to her own room. Two lighted candles, in curious old china candlesticks, stood on the dressing-table; and stationed beside it, to Mabel's great surprise, stood an attendant awaiting her: an Italian maid, who had accompanied Mrs. Stretton to England when she became mistress of Ringwood Chace, and whom Mrs. Stretton had now especially appropriated to her niece's service. She herself required little or no attendance; but Mabel must have around her all that befitted the sister of the heir of Ringwood.

Papal aggression had not then been heard of; and most good Catholics, in humble life at least, were allowed by their priests peacefully to save their own souls by fasts and festivals, and enjoy their earthly life to the utmost, *en attendant*, without troubling themselves about the spiritual concerns of other people. But the language? Mabel had been learning Italian at school, and could construe Tasso; but that was a very different thing from expressing all her little personal wants in the foreign idiom. However, between French, which Mabel knew well, and her attendant a little, and the great power possessed by both, of reading countenances and speaking with the eyes, they got on pretty well; and Mabel was soon sufficiently at ease to look round the room.

The toilet-table, a quaint japan affair, all drawers and tiny closets, with oval swing glass to match, stood a little in front of the broad sweeping window-curtains. These, like

the carpet, were of a bright peculiar blue ; all, however, a good deal faded. Facing the window stood a bedstead of polished walnut, with heavy circular canopy, whence hung blue silk curtains, like those before the window. The wardrobe was in marqueterie, of many-coloured flowers. On the high wooden mantel-shelf, painted white, stood superb old china jars, corresponding with the candlesticks on the table.

As soon as the two children were ready, the housemaid showed them down to the dining-room, where supper was prepared. The room seemed long, rather narrow, and low-pitched ; it was imperfectly lighted, and looked dim and undefined. At the suppers-table Mrs. Stretton presided, with good-natured attention ; she also tried to draw the children into conversation about their journey. Arthur was soon eagerly expatiating on the wonders of the day ; Mrs. Stretton evidently interested, almost in spite of herself. But the

whirl of a long, exciting day was in Mabel's ears and brain ; she scarcely knew what was said to her, or what she answered ; and was only too thankful when she found herself at last in silence and darkness ;—to think over everything, she said to herself. However, after two minutes, she thought not at all ; every impression was absorbed in sleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHE woke to find her room a blaze of light. She had been roused by the undrawing of her window-curtains ; all the tiny panes of the half-hexagon oriel window were sparkling like diamonds ; the deep bay, a small room of itself, was flooded with brightness. A low window-seat, with cushions of blue silk like the curtains, ran round the recess ; India matting was on the floor. No wonder cushions and matting, curtains and carpet, all were faded, when every ray of sun, from dawn till noon,

poured in at the window thus ; and even the sunset glow stole in sideways.

Mabel sprang up in high spirits, and ran bare-footed into the recess. Oh, that window ! —The park, on this side of the house, sloped suddenly down into a deep valley, quite dark with the crowded shade ; and beyond, in the open sunshine, lay the broad expanse of undulating hills, flecked with cloud-shadows, islanded here and there with groups of trees, or scarped abruptly with white cliffs. And in the extreme distance, on the far horizon, lay a faint vapoury *something*, which no description could distinguish from a cloud, but which Mabel *knew*, with inexplicable certainty, was the *sea*.

She dressed quickly,—not too quickly, however ; for when, leading Arthur by the hand, she entered the dining-room, the door of which old Thomas threw open for her, Mrs. Stretton was already there, with the great silver urn hissing and steaming before her.

Notwithstanding its want of proportion, and formal old-fashioned furniture, the dining-room looked cheerful by daylight. Mabel liked the dark, shining wainscot, all glowing with pictures; the slippery, oaken floor; still better, the kaleidoscope-pattern flower-garden, of tiny bright-coloured beds wedged close together, which lay like a gorgeous carpet below the broad Elizabethan windows; and better still, circling all around, the shaggy, ferny Chace.

At one end, or rather, in one corner of the room, was another window, odd and irregular, opening with two or three steps to a broad turfed terrace; below which lay a bowling-green, overlooked, at the farther end, by a high walk arched over with fruit-trees, and by fantastic pavilions at the corners.

Mabel could scarcely eat her breakfast, or keep her attention to Mrs. Stretton's occasional remarks and inquiries.

"I shall be busy for a little while, Mabel,"

said Mrs. Stretton, as she rose; "perhaps you and your brother would like to run out, and take a look at the place. I wish you to feel it a home; but don't stray off till you know your way. I shall want you presently in my dressing-room, to look over your clothes. I will send for you when I am ready."

Eagerly the brother and sister started up and hurried into the hall, where they stood looking round them, rather bewildered for a moment; there were so many doors, and one or two small passages, besides the long matted one, along which they had been conducted the previous evening. They had just discovered the massive, deeply-carved entrance-door, when old Thomas, emerging suddenly from one of the little passages, hastened to open it, with a reverential bow, and a look in which scrutinizing curiosity mingled with deep respect, as he scanned, in the broad daylight, the two little representatives of "the family."

“ Old Thomas ” was the only man-servant in that large, rambling house. Out of doors, gamekeepers, gardeners, and labourers of all sorts were indispensable ; the place was so large, that Mrs. Stretton’s far-sighted economy could not but aim principally at its being thoroughly well kept up. But in-doors, old Thomas was fully equal to the wants of the family, in their present limited numbers, and recluse way of life. He was a serving-man of the old school ; amenable, with unquestioning loyalty, to all of the blood of Stretton ; to his fellow-servants, intractable and despotic ; a very thorn in the flesh, from his almost aggressive fidelity, and dogged, petulant persistence in old ways and old observances.

The two children stepped out quickly through the heavy porch ; the door closed behind them ; the fresh north-west wind blew in their faces, as they stood in the shadow of the old house, on the broad gravel platform before its entrance front ; the long, irregular

pile, grey and fretted, stretching on either hand. Rains and winds had worn away all sharpness and distinctness from the once elaborate carving of the stone, but could not lessen the impression of massive strength and warm home-shelter. Three many-angled turrets, jutting out at irregular intervals, threw their distinctly cut outlines beyond the shadow of the house, far out into the bright sunshine.

Mabel and Arthur stood some moments, side by side, in perfect silence. The sudden burst of boundless forest scenery, the heaving, palpitating sea of trees rushing and murmuring below their feet, and melting away, all round the horizon, in faint, hazy, distance,—almost took away their breath.

It was only gradually that they began really to look and examine ; to trace delightedly the road by which they had arrived, emerging from the deep shade of the woods, coming straight up between the two long files of beech-trees, straight up the centre of the

formal oblong grass-plot, to the very platform on which they stood ;—to distinguish Ringwood village and church, just visible, through an opening cut for the purpose ;—to gaze with fascinated wonder on the strange old oaks, scattered far apart between the beech-tree avenue and the circling shades ; oaks which had been past their prime before the house was built ; and now stood, hoar and gigantic, the dis-crowned monarchs of the place, their knotted arms flung wildly up towards the sky, in defiance or appeal.

“ Come, Arthur,” said Mabel, rousing herself at length with something like a sigh.

Slowly and thoughtfully they now strolled along the front, peering into the innumerable windows, some low and broad, some lofty, projecting, and angular. Along this front lay the old state-rooms, now seldom used ; the ball-room, with inlaid floor and fanciful musicians’ gallery ; the saloon, as it was still called,—its many-shaped mirrors framed in

stucco garlands ; its low ceiling, heavy with emblems and ciphers, commemorating a visit from the Maiden Queen.

Suddenly, as they turned the extreme angle of the building to the left, the full south sun burst joyously upon them, half dazzling in contrast to the shadow from which they emerged. They were on the green terrace, which they had looked down upon from the dining-room ; the Bowling-Green Terrace, the Western Terrace, as it was variously called.

“ Now, Arthur ! a race ! ” exclaimed Mabel, suddenly starting off as she spoke.

She was at the end of the terrace first ; no wonder ; besides being older and taller, she had taken him at a disadvantage. She stood one moment to wait for him, laughing and looking back, the sun gleaming sideways on her face and hair ; but sprang forward again, as she perceived, on turning round, the flower-garden which had so taken her fancy, under the south windows.

“Oh, Arthur! here are these beautiful flowers! how bright they are here in the sun, though it is autumn now. And those are the hills I see from my window! And see, there is an orchard down below the bowling-green. What a large, old orchard! how far it runs down the hill; there seems no end to it. Let us go and lose ourselves among the trees.”

“You know,”—said Arthur, hesitating, “aunt told us not—”

“Yes,” said Mabel, doubtfully, “but would not that be the more fun?” She looked down for a minute, questioning, in his face. “Well, I suppose we had better not. I will only go down among the flowers.”

And she was soon among the mazes of the flower-beds; but was quickly recalled.

“Mab! Mab! come here!”

Arthur had reached the extreme east end, where the turf, sprinkled with pines and cedars, came up close to the large, green-curtained window of the library: the favourite

family sitting-room, while there *was* a family, on summer mornings and winter evenings.

“What a pretty room!” exclaimed Mabel; “look at all the books!”

“Yes, but, Mab, look here!” and he pointed to a large, solitary cedar, its broad horizontal masses of foliage fully illuminated above, and black in shadow below. “Mabel, I could draw *that*! On the other side it was *too much*.” And he began turning out his pockets; producing, among sundry boy’s treasures, in the way of knives and string, two or three clumsy, half-blunted stumps of pencil. “If I had but a bit of paper! Mabel, have you any?” he went on, desperately turning his pockets inside out, without finding what he wanted.

“No, indeed—not a bit; but I will fetch you some in a minute;” and she was turning to go in.

“Oh! stay—that light may be gone! Here is an old letter of yours, which you sent me

from school. I can do what I want on the back, and then copy it when I go in."

Just at this moment Martha, the housemaid, came out from the eastern shrubbery, and approached Mabel.

"Please, Miss, your aunt is ready for you, if you will be so good as to come to her in her dréssing-room."

"Very well, Martha, if you will show me the way." And she followed Martha through the little side-entrance, through one of the odd little passages, into the large hall, and then up the stairs.

"Your aunt told me to unpack your things, Miss, and take them to her to look at. She thought I should understand best about that, perhaps. Afterwards, you know, ma'am, Bianca will have charge of them," said the formal old servant, as they proceeded. "Your books, ma'am, and all your *own* little things, I have put out in your room till you please to see where you would like to have them."

About half-way up the main staircase, a smaller flight, which Mabel, in her hurried passage to and from her own room, had not observed, branched off on the right hand; and, ascending it under Martha's guidance, she found herself in a small square vestibule, looking like a museum of Indian china, cabinets, and oriental treasures of every description.

"That is Mrs. Stretton's bedroom," said Martha, pointing to a door which faced them as they entered; "and this," turning towards one on the right, "is her dressing-room."

"And where does that lead to?" said Mabel, pointing to a third door, on the left.

"Oh! hush! hush! Miss," interposed Martha, below her breath. "That is poor Mr. Arthur's room."

Then, turning quickly towards the dressing-room, she knocked at the door, and ushered Mabel in.

CHAPTER XIV.

MABEL almost started, as she caught the first sight of the room. It was so peculiar—so different from what she had imagined.

She found herself in one of the projecting turrets which she had seen from the front. Four sides of the octagon room had windows, deeply cut in the wall; the four opposite had mirrors to correspond; mirrors and windows alike framed, almost muffled, in the embossed draperies of pale, sea-green silk, which seemed but a faint reflection of the verdure without. A small fringed carpet, of fine but faded

tapestry-work, lay on the centre of the floor; upon it stood the old-fashioned, draped toilet, laden with little trays and boxes, in ebony and silver, and supporting the small, but peculiarly brilliant mirror, with frame and sconces in filigree frost-work of silver. The little toilet-stool, the carpet, even the floor, bore the familiar Stretton crest:—the Flying Arrow, with its motto, “Straight on,” which Edward and Clara so much loved.

This room had been the tiring-chamber of the matrons of Ringwood as far back as tradition served. On that stool Dame Margery, Mrs. Stretton’s mother, had sat as a bride;—and daily, during the brief remainder of her life, for the due combing and powdering of those golden locks, which Time was never to transmute to silver. Only her successor, Lady Harriet, had objected, not unreasonably, to the cold of the windy chamber. A gorgeous apartment, all satin and gilding, had been decorated for her use in another part of the

house. Her freak was a fortunate one, or Mrs. Stretton would have felt that her mother's bower had been desecrated. She herself never dressed there. Indeed its costly apparatus would have seemed a satire upon the business-like despatch of her toilet. But she loved the room, and maintained inviolate as much of its antique splendour as could in any way be made compatible with modern uses. Yet one or two of her innovations, however necessary, looked almost barbarous. One mirror had been curtailed of its proportions, and formed only the chimney-glass to a small modern fire-place; and a heavy bureau, with lid let down to serve as a writing-table, half blocked up one of the windows. A plain square table and large couch were drawn near to the fire-place; and on these Mabel's little wardrobe was laid out for inspection. Mrs. Stretton was seated, waiting for her niece's presence, before she began a closer examination.

Clara had always provided for Mabel as for

a younger sister ; and Mrs. Stretton looked somewhat struck, as one article after another was unfolded before her.

“ My dear ! ” she said rather hesitatingly, when the servant had left the room ; “ you do not think they would like to be *paid* for these things, do you ? ”

“ Aunt ! ”—exclaimed Mabel, in horror.

“ Ah ! well, I suppose it wouldn’t do,” said Mrs. Stretton ; “ but it is very unpleasant.”

“ Aunt,” resumed Mabel, after a few minutes,—“ I should like to write to Clara ; to-day, if you please.”

“ Of course, my dear. They have been very kind and generous to you, and I should wish you to be properly grateful. You know that I wrote to ask them here, but they declined.”

“ Of course,” said Mabel.

“ So you see, my dear, they have the good sense to understand that any close intercourse between you and them is not now desirable.

No doubt they will occasionally favour you with a letter, and then I should always wish you to answer it at once."

Mabel went abruptly out of the room, leaving Mrs. Stretton in the midst of silk and muslin frocks; and shut herself up in her own sunny bed-room, to write to Clara. There she found her pretty little desk, placed by the careful Martha on a small writing-table, in a corner somewhat shaded from the over-brightness which now flooded the centre of the room. The desk had been sent to her at school by Mr. Stretton two birthdays before; and fitted up by Clara with every imaginable and unimaginable appliance for writing; the gift had done more for Mabel's penmanship, not before very promising, than fifty lessons. Seating herself at once, she was soon absorbed in her letter. It was very long, and rather more warmly expressed than was usual with Mabel's undemonstrative nature; giving minute particulars of her journey and arrival, and a full description of the place, as far as

she had yet seen it ; her aunt was scarcely mentioned, and that only incidentally. She had written herself into all her usual animation, and was just folding her letter, with sparkling eyes and glowing cheeks, when Bianca entered in great excitement, explaining, with many gesticulations, that there was only just time to dress for dinner. (Early country hours still reigned in full force in Mrs. Stretton's primitive household.)

Mabel found time, however, to seal her letter, with a candle which she sent Bianca to fetch ; and holding it in her hand, she ran down stairs, just as the bell was ringing. In the hall she met her aunt, coming along the matted passage from her business-room.

"If you please, aunt, may this letter go to the post?" said Mabel, handing it to her.

"Thomas, put Miss Mabel's letter into the post-bag ; my letters are not ready yet." She gave him the letter, and a key, as she spoke.

Old Thomas, who had been waiting in the hall for his mistress, unlocked the bag, which lay on the oak table; put in the letter, bringing back the key; and then followed into the dining-room, where was served the plain family dinner, of home produce; at which he attended with much respect, if in somewhat antiquated style. Arthur, who had to be fetched in at the last moment, looked rather absent, but very happy; Mrs. Stretton also seemed pre-occupied, as people often are at early dinners, with half the day's business still weighing on their minds. She was probably thinking of her unfinished letters, to be completed in the afternoon. As soon as dinner was over, she was called away to some one waiting to speak to her.

“Arthur!” said Mabel, taking both her brother's hands, as soon as her aunt had left the room;—“Arthur! are you glad to be here? Dear mamma lived here, you know, when she was our age. Aunt Stretton is not

like her ; but we belong here ; and there are two of us. Arthur, are you glad ?”

“ Oh yes, Mabel, so glad ! But are you ?”

Before Mabel could answer, there was a knock at the door ; and their travelling companion, Mrs. Jones, the housekeeper, entered, curtseying.

“ I beg your pardon, Miss ; hope you and the young gentleman are well after your journey. Mrs. Stretton sent me, ma’am, to ask if you and Master Arthur would like to see the house.”

At the death of Mrs. Stretton’s father, Ringwood had been sold as it stood ; only the family portraits, and a few articles of especial family interest, being reserved. When Mrs. Stretton at length regained possession of the old place, she had been considerably relieved to find things not greatly altered ; she had, however, devoted herself heart and soul to restoring all, as nearly as possible, to its original state. In this, “ old Thomas,” as he

was called at a later period, was her zealous coadjutor.

He had been born at the Chace, where his father was butler in "the old squire's time." The son was just beginning to plume himself in his new-fledged honours as under-footman, when "the Squire" died, and the break-up of the family took place.

Mrs. Stretton, on returning to the old estate, had enquired carefully for any servants of her father, who might be still lingering in the neighbourhood. But all were either dead or dispersed, except the old butler's son, whom she at once took into her service.

Embued by his father from infancy with exalted ideas of the dignity of "the family," Thomas was even more scandalized than his mistress at the late occupants, for having presumed to alter anything; and threw all his energies into the work of restoration, in which his co-operation proved invaluable. He really knew more exactly than she did how every-

thing had stood, having had more to do with the interior details of the establishment. Thanks to their united efforts, the family residence, at the time when Mabel and Arthur became its inmates, really presented very much the same aspect, within and without, as it had done when Mrs. Stretton was herself a child.

Ringwood Chace, like most old houses of the same date, boasted its due share of quaintly-carved panelings and fantastic stucco mouldings ; of lofty mantelpieces, enriched, even to the ceiling, with flowers, figures, and blazonry, in dark oak or parti-coloured marbles ; its tiles of blue delft, illustrative of Scripture history. It had also, no doubt, its appropriate traditions and well-attested legends. But Mrs. Jones, as a comparatively newcomer, lacked all interest and genius for such matters. When her natural uncommunicativeness at length thawed, under the persevering inquiries of her young companions, her only topic was, " Poor Master Arthur ;"

—his beauty and promise, his fun and frolic, his untimely end and doleful burial. With his pranks, with his end, every nook and corner of the old house was in her mind associated ; it was the one episode of the family history which her own eyes had witnessed, her own heart had shared ; it had seized on an imagination to which tales of past splendour or sorrow were dead and unmeaning. When once started on this theme, she could scarcely be diverted to any other, even by those who would gladly have escaped from a subject so painful. But to the quick sympathy and eager curiosity of the two children it had a peculiar attraction ; and incited by their looks rather than by their words, she went into every particular, pointed out every association ; dwelling, with the minute recapitulation in which persons of that class delight, on the most painful details, the most harrowing descriptions.

At length a summons from her mis-

tress put at end to her functions as cicerone; hastily she re-conducted Mabel and Arthur into the gallery, where their own rooms were situated, and there left them, standing hand in hand, silent and thoughtful; for the moment thoroughly saddened by the images which her talk had conjured up.

“Oh, Arthur! and we never might have come here at all, if our poor cousin had not died! And our aunt can never love us, you know, as she loved him!” said Mabel, as they returned to their own nook of the gallery.

Arthur did not hear; he had turned off into his own room, the door of which they just then reached. In a minute he darted out again.

“Oh, Mabel! come and look! One would think my aunt knew how I love the sunset!”

She followed him back into the room, which was, indeed, steeped in the crimson glow. The long fantastic shadows of the

bowling-green pavilions lay aslant across the turf below the window.

“ Oh, Mabel !” he exclaimed again, “ I am so happy here !”

And Mabel went down to tea, far more in charity with her aunt than she had felt at dinner-time. Nor did she even consider herself aggrieved, though she was considerably startled, when Mrs. Stretton said, as she bade her good-night—

“ Your governess will be here to-morrow, Mabel. She has been staying here already ; but I thought she had better visit some friends for a day or two, that you might feel yourself at home first.”

CHAPTER XV.

No long period, truly, had Mrs. Stretton allowed her niece for domestication ! However, the arrival next day of the governess was rather a relief than otherwise. It was evident at once that she was no formidable person ; and as she spoke English tolerably, her being a German only gave a spice of novelty to the affair. As if to neutralize any possible Romanizing influence from the Italian maid, Mrs. Stretton had selected as her niece's governess a staunch German Protestant, an enthusiastic worshipper of Gustavus

Adolphus ; *du reste*, very musical, very good-natured, perfectly inoffensive and insignificant. Mrs. Stretton wanted no second ruling spirit in her dominions.

Mabel seldom had any difficulty about lessons ; and a new language rather made her more comfortable — it kept her quiet.

With regard to poor little Arthur, matters were not quite so easily arranged. Mrs. Stretton's plans for him all melted into distance, when she found how utterly the poor child's education had been neglected. She held long conferences on the subject with the vicar, hoping that he would offer to work the boy up for a public school. But the vicar, who probably had no inclination for such very rudimentary teaching as was required, recommended, what was really the best plan on all accounts, that he should be sent daily to a preparatory school in the neighbourhood, where he would have, what he needed fully

as much as instruction, the society of boys of his own age.

Arthur received the announcement of his fate without a murmur; but it was hardly to be expected that he should like it; for, besides being painfully shy, he was as much beyond his age in taste and feeling, as he was behind it in regular school knowledge.

Mabel, even after her first shyness had subsided, felt in no way drawn towards her aunt. Arthur, on the contrary, had attached himself to her at once; took all sorts of childish and boyish liberties with her; followed her about the house and garden, and even made good an unquestioned right of entrance into her dressing-room and study at all hours. At first she would hardly look at him; even avoided speaking to him, and especially using his name. Then, by a sudden change of feeling, he became her idol.

She at once read in his face his shrinking from the thought of school.

“Arthur! Arthur!”—(it was almost the first time she had called him by his name,)—
“do not look at me in that way! If you do not like going to school, say so, and you shall not go; you shall not do anything you do not like!”

“I think, aunt,” said Arthur, in his quiet way, “I shall always like to do what pleases you.”

Mrs. Stretton got up, went round to him, and kissed his forehead. “Will you go to school?” was all she said.

“Yes!” was his only answer.

So he went daily, and became daily livelier, stronger, more boyish; though his progress in his severer studies was certainly not what it might have been, had he been withdrawn entirely from Mabel’s influence; which was exercised in a way by no means favourable to steady application. She was herself accustomed to learn her lessons in a mysterious nondescript manner, at odds and ends of time;

very often at the last moment ; declaring, indeed, that she could not fix her attention till it came to the last chance. Such plans were very naturally reprobated by all her instructors as unorthodox ; as immoral, in fact. But in her individual case, it was not easy to proceed to extreme measures for their suppression. Though her lessons might not be invariably well-learnt, they were so, on the average, rather oftener than those of others ; so she escaped pretty well, though regarded on the whole as a suspected character. With respect to Arthur, she probably thought, if indeed she thought at all on the subject, that he was to manage as she did herself ; so she kept the unlucky boy, evening after evening, in a state of entire dissipation,—talking, laughing, and playing ; or making little sketches for her, of odd passing fancies, which, as she said, she wanted to draw for herself, but could not ;—while he ought to have been hard at work, preparing his lessons for the morrow. Many

a merry evening did the two children thus spend together, at one end of the long, ill-lighted dining-room, while Fräulein C. was dozing over her endless knitting at the other end, and Mrs. Stretton was far away in her business-room at the opposite extremity of the house.

Now and then, indeed, Mabel was absorbed in a book ; entranced, spell-bound, beyond all power of hearing, far less of answering, anything addressed to her from without. On such occasions, Arthur seldom failed to show, by his proficiency the next day, how he might have distinguished himself, had a fair chance been allowed him.

One palliating consideration might perhaps be urged in excuse for Mabel's conduct : her life in the day-time was certainly of the quietest. Not that she disliked this, however ; there was a peculiar charm for her in the singular stillness of the Chace, where nothing seemed ever to happen, and very little was said. It

was like living in a dream. Then she had her shaggy pony and unwieldy Newfoundland puppy. It had soon been discovered that she could ride well and fearlessly; having first learnt among the slippery Welsh hills, where the rough little animal had to be caught and saddled before he could be mounted; and having afterwards been accustomed to share "the boys'" equestrian exercise. So she was allowed to range at her will, out of lesson-hours, within the wide-sweeping, ferny Chace, of which she was never tired; sometimes with a basket, Welsh fashion, on her pommel, to bring home the gigantic cones which strewed the ground in her favourite fir-plantations. As little did she tire of rambling about the old house; contriving incidents, in her own mind, for every odd-shaped room and intricate passage; and learning, as far as any one could tell her, the history of the old portraits scattered through every part. They were to her, indeed, rather *persons*

than *pictures*;—a silent company peopling the rooms.

Even had her aunt won more upon her affections, Mrs. Stretton was always immersed in business; shut up in her private room, where somebody seemed always to have something to say to her; or driving herself, in her low pony-chair, in all directions over the estate. Now and then, when it did not happen to be Mabel's lesson-time, her aunt invited her to accompany her. Mabel enjoyed the exercise, as a variety from her pony-riding;—the greater extent thus given to her excursions;—the views, caught here and there through the autumnal mists;—the sight of busy farm-yards and snug homesteads. It was, however, only the least favourable specimens of these abodes which she had the opportunity of closely inspecting. Mrs. Stretton's drives were drives of business, not of amusement; and were directed chiefly where there was something amiss; wherever the

people were ill or idle, the houses dirty or dilapidated.

At dinner-time, in Arthur's absence, the chief variety for Mabel was the acquisition of sundry new German phrases, which Fräulein C., faithful to her vocation, seized every opportunity to instil. This Mabel rather enjoyed, being herself also very zealous about the new language. It may be questioned, however, whether she would not now have listened with less impatience than formerly to the political discussions which she had been used to think so tiresome, when Mr. Stretton and Edward came home to dinner, full-charged with news or surmises of important movements then pending ; or when some chance gentleman-visitor gave such a direction to the conversation. No visitor ever appeared to dine at the Chace, except, occasionally, Dr. Hinchley, the vicar : a quiet, gentlemanly old man, a childless widower ; reputed, with truth, to be a profound scholar ; the rumour of which

scholarship caused Mabel to look at him with intense awe and curiosity, and to drink in anxiously every word that fell from his mouth. As none of his erudition, however, by any chance oozed out in ordinary conversation, it was only through her ocular perceptions that she stood any chance of benefit. She acquired, and retained through life, a distinct notion what a great scholar was like; which was convenient in her case, as she seldom felt easy unless she could form to herself a vivid picture of whatever she read or heard about.

Dr. Hinchley was very good to the poor of the neighbourhood, in his way, as Mrs. Stretton was in hers; but neither of them was at all fond of talking about it; and both had the same brief, clear way of despatching business. So any parish matters were soon settled between them; and Mrs. Stretton was as incompetent as Mabel to discuss with him the mysteries of the Greek choruses,—the one

subject on which he was said infallibly to warm ; so his visits at the Chace were usually very quiet affairs. With respect to Mabel, it remained doubtful whether her existence was ever distinctly recognized by him. He was a very tall man, and had a way of looking straight before him into vacancy ; and never having had children of his own, had never learnt to lower his eyes to take cognizance of those so much below the level of his own lofty stature.

One other professional visitor, the apothecary, occasionally looked in, chiefly in the afternoon, to report to Mrs. Stretton respecting patients whom he might be attending at her desire, or any others whom he considered in need of the extra comforts and nourishment which she was always ready to send on his recommendation. He was the very opposite of the vicar, in most respects ; middle-aged and middle-sized ; with hair inclining to red, a shining complexion, and a strong ten-

dency to obsequiousness, only just kept in check by Mrs. Stretton's short, decided manner. There was also a latent tendency to facetiousness, which never appeared in her presence; but which showed itself when he was once by some chance left alone with Mabel, with whom he felt more at ease. His attempts at joking, however, though poor enough, were perfectly harmless and unobjectionable, in matter and meaning. It must have been either pride or fastidiousness on her part which took the alarm, and made her thereafter anxiously avoid being left in the room with him.

The few country "neighbours" who might have claimed to visit with Ringwood, lived for the most part at some considerable distance. Colonel Stretton's long illness, and afterwards his death, had furnished his widow with a plea for seclusion, of which she had perhaps found it convenient to avail herself.

Mabel, whose perceptions of pecuniary

matters had been painfully quickened by the privations of her early years, and the struggles which she had witnessed even when too young to share, soon understood plainly that Mrs. Stretton was far from *rich*, as that word would have been applied, for instance, by "the Strettons;" in whose abounding home there was no ostentation of wealth, simply because its possession was a matter of course. At Ringwood, the family coach stood in the coach-house, unused, except on special occasions. Scarcely an article of modern luxury was to be seen in the house; not a conservatory or forcing-house, a newly-introduced shrub or flower, in the grounds. Mrs. Stretton's own dress was too plain, almost homely, to be becoming; except, again, on special occasions. But she was Mrs. Stretton, of Ringwood Chace; and that was enough for herself and all others.

Mabel could not but feel that it was not love, but pride, which surrounded *her*, as a

daughter of the house, with all which her aunt considered suitable to that position; and though she felt happy and at ease, and perfectly satisfied that she "*belonged*" there, she often reproached herself sorely for not being properly grateful.

One wintry morning, as Mabel, having seen Arthur start for school, was strolling rather listlessly on the bowling-green, she suddenly met her aunt, returning from her usual daily inspection of the kitchen-garden, which lay in the sheltered hollow below the orchard. She seemed struck by something unusual in Mabel's look and manner.

"This is not fair to you, child," she said abruptly. "If you like, you shall drive with me this morning. Tell Fräulein you will not be at home for lessons to-day."

Mabel felt that a kindness was intended; and she exerted herself to take an interest in the affairs of the different tenants whom they visited in their drive, and to enter into the

merits of the various agricultural improvements which Mrs. Stretton had to inspect.

At last, after a long, dull time in one of the cottages which wanted repair, Mrs. Stretton called a boy to her, and told him to take the pony home.

“I shall walk round by Calder House,” she said. “I want you to make acquaintance with Catherine Calder,” she added to Mabel, as they walked on together.

CHAPTER XVI.

CALDER HOUSE was scarce a quarter of a mile from Ringwood village ; and the village communicated with the Chace house by a short cut across the park. The families were thus neighbours, and had been hereditary friends ; but, owing to the unsocial habits of the two present households, and to their belonging to different parishes, the intimacy had languished of late.

General Calder, an old fellow-campaigner of Colonel Stretton's, had spent his best years in tropical service. His daughter well remem-

bered his returning, seemingly in full health and strength, only to die in his native home. He had left it in boyhood, an unportioned younger son. The death of an elder brother, however, had early made the family estate his own. But he had already learnt to love his profession and the land of his adoption, and he did not revisit England till Catherine's beautiful young mother fell a victim to the climate of India. Then a longing seized on him for the fair-haired little girl, far away across the sea, in her English boarding-school. He shuddered at the thought of recalling her, to fade, probably, as her mother had done. He had a son, too, a half-brother of Catherine's, ten years older, who was now pursuing his college studies in England; and, as he had no vocation for a soldier's life, there was little hope of his joining his father in India. So General Calder resigned his commission, recrossed the ocean, and established himself at Calder House; his little girl being recalled

from school, “to *take care*” of him ; and Frank spending his vacations with them in the long-desolate house, now suddenly converted into a home. Those days were the sunshiny epoch to which Catherine still continually looked back : her father’s almost idolatrous devotion to herself ; and the wild frolics of the young collegian, who strove, with little success, to moderate his exuberant spirits, out of respect to his father’s recent loss ;—a loss in which he had no personal share, and of which Catherine, notwithstanding her deep mourning, could have no practical perception ;—all this appeared in remembrance a vivid dream, wholly unconnected with her real life, before or after. Then her own childish excitement, as the period approached for Frank’s attaining his majority ;—the abrupt stop put to all preparations by the General’s sudden illness ;—the period of suspense and dismay, in the midst of which the longed for day passed unnoticed, and at the termination of which the young heir found

himself in mournful possession, with this little helpless sister bequeathed by their father to his sole guardianship.

The shock, the sudden weight of responsibilities, seemed to have broken, once and for ever, the buoyant spirits of the young Oxonian. Three years had passed ; but Catherine's merry playmate-brother returned no more. Frank had become suddenly a grave, anxious man ; superintending, with scrupulous attention, the management of the long-neglected estate, but spending much of his time shut up in London chambers, working hard at the study of the law, which he declared his intention of following as a profession. *Why*, was a mystery to neighbours and dependents all the country round. Something of miserliness must have seized the young heir, on the sudden accession of wealth. The estates were the most valuable in the county ; and not only unincumbered, but further enriched by General Calder's Indian fortune. Yet Frank, formerly joyous

and extravagant, seemed to grudge himself the smallest indulgence; lived simply and sparingly as any portionless gentleman; and appeared absorbed in preparation for a laborious profession, as if he had had his bread to earn. His parsimony, however, was confined to himself. All that appertained to the family position was scrupulously kept up; and where Catherine was concerned, expense never entered into the question. Yet the poor girl led a desolate sort of life under the elderly relative whom her brother had engaged to take charge of her, and to superintend the lessons she received from her many masters. Frank was himself little at home; and, when there, generally absorbed in business or study. Catherine's society evidently gave him little pleasure. Indeed he rather avoided than sought her presence. But he was devotedly kind to her. His solicitude, indeed, to fulfil all her wishes was almost painful to its object, and wholly checked the girlish impulse to express

every desire as it arose. It was only when she attempted to thank him that Frank became harsh. "Child, what have I done but my duty?" had been his impatient rejoinder, till Catherine shut up her thanks in her own heart, and her tears with them.

Calder House itself was not a cheerful residence. It was *old*, without being *ancient*; and thus especially required the look of a happy and prosperous habitation to enliven it. But though both house and grounds were well kept up, all sign of living interest and enjoyment seemed wanting. Large as was the estate, there was no park; nothing more than grounds of moderate extent attached to the house, which stood within a high wall, not many yards back from the village road. As Mabel and her aunt passed through the heavy wooden gates, they found themselves within a few steps of the broad, well-gravelled sweep surrounding the well-mown circular grass-plot; the gravel coming up close to the

windows, and filling the half-square formed by the house, itself unscreened by shrubs or creepers; the stone of which it was built assuming, in the damp November weather, a peculiarly dingy, discoloured appearance. The oldest part, long and low, was surmounted by a high-pitched, slated roof, with dormer windows. At the very top swung a huge bell, in its quaint little belfry. Two rows of uniform sash windows ran along the whole front; unbroken, save by the central entrance door, which was unrelieved by steps or portico. The wing, at right angles with the main building, was at once handsomer and more irregular than the old part, to which it had been gradually added; having been at first a mere shapeless excrescence, and afterwards *drawn out*, as it were, telescope-wise, to considerable length. A range of stabling, fitter in extent for a palace than for a country gentleman's residence, straggled out in a line with the older portion of the house.

The door was opened by a stately powdered butler, courteous and obsequious, who conducted the visitors along a corridor, and up a wide, shallow staircase, to the drawing-room.

As the room door was opened, the sound of music sprang forth to meet them; but the large, rather forlorn-looking apartment was untenanted.

"Miss Calder is in her little room," said the servant; then, having placed chairs for the visitors, he knocked at an inner door, opposite that by which they had entered, and announced their names to some one within. The music suddenly ceased, and Catherine instantly entered the drawing-room.

She was much taller than Mabel, though but a few months older; very slight and unformed, but indescribably graceful, almost stately, in attitude and movement; her features too, though not strictly beautiful, were far more regular than Mabel's.

"Catherine," said Mrs. Stretton, "I have

brought my niece Mabel to see you. I hope you will be good friends."

Catherine slowly turned her head, and looked at Mabel timidly from under her long curled lashes ; then went up to her shyly, and kissed her.

Mrs. Elliott now came in, and began a general conversation, comprising the usual chat of a country morning call.

Mrs. Elliott was a person exactly adapted for her post ; one of a by no means scanty class, which seems especially provided for such emergencies. She had had from her youth upwards a very fair portion of good looks, without beauty ;—a large share of excellent sense, without talent ;—a kind heart and amiable disposition, without warmth of affection or sensitiveness of feeling ;—perfect good-breeding without a particle of grace or elegance. She had been a good wife, and was now a contented widow ; all the more contented that her residence amid the comforts of Calder

House eked out her limited income, and her position there gave her an importance which she could not otherwise have laid claim to. She never could have been, under any circumstances, conspicuous or interesting of herself; she was admirable as the agent and representative of others.

A visit from Mrs. Stretton was by no means a frequent occurrence; and Mrs. Elliott was not the only person of good standing in the neighbourhood by whom it would have been esteemed no small favour. So she devoted herself zealously to do the honours to her unexpected guest, and to entertain her with conversation upon all the current topics of the neighbourhood: the weather, the crops, the last county ball, the approaching election, the recent assizes;—Mrs. Stretton's new school-house in the village, and the new church which somebody was building in an adjoining parish;—to say nothing of births and deaths, of weddings past and prospective.

Catherine, who had looked much relieved at her entrance, remained sitting by Mabel, quite silent, unless when one of the elder ladies expressly addressed her. Mabel, on her part, was too shy to speak; the talk of Mrs. Stretton and Mrs. Elliott referred entirely to persons and things of which she had no knowledge. But she found plenty to amuse her eyes; in the heavy garlands and masks of the ceiling; in the little classical medallions and brocaded silk cushioning of the chairs and sofas; in the groups of musical instruments painted on the walls, pendent by blue ribbon among wreaths of roses; all originally well executed, but now rather dim and indistinct;—in the extensive prospect of level country, through which a broad river wound its way slowly to the sea. It was difficult to believe herself so short a distance from the Chace. That river she had indeed seen from some of the upper windows, but it seemed thence so distant and subordi-

nate an object, that she now scarcely recognized it.

The two girls, as they sat there, silent, side by side, presented a striking contrast : Catherine's transparent paleness, and quiet, subdued manner, making her appear older than she really was ; while Mabel, with her glowing colour, rounded contour, and expression of abounding health and animation, looked, what she really was, a very child.

When Mrs. Stretton at last rose to leave, Catherine took hold of Mabel's hand.

" May she not stay ?" she asked.

" Of course, my dear, if you both like. Perhaps you will walk home with her this evening. You would like to stay, would you not, Mabel ?"

" Yes," was Mabel's only answer.

Mrs. Elliott followed Mrs. Stretton down stairs ; then, having seen her to the door, she again looked into the drawing-room for a moment.

“I will leave you, my dear Catherine, to entertain Miss Arleigh.” And she passed on to the pretty little sitting-room upstairs, which was appropriated to her and Catherine’s exclusive use.

“Would you like to see *my* little room?” said Catherine, as soon as Mrs. Elliott was gone. And without waiting for an answer, she opened the inner door.

Two negatives make an affirmative. The two shy girls, the moment they were left alone together, became entirely at ease in each other’s society.

The “little room” into which Catherine now ushered her new companion, was indeed no more than a deep bay window, partitioned off from one end of the drawing-room in earlier and more primitive days, for the purposes of a china-closet. It was now nearly filled by its one piece of furniture : a splendid grand piano, then a modern novelty ; Frank’s gift to his sister.

The window was darkened by shrubs and trees, and looked down merely on the turf which they shaded. The walls were covered with a papering of dark green ivy, interspersed with clusters of honeysuckle. Old prints, of shepherdesses in broad hats, and shepherds playing double pipes, seemed to have been collected in this little nook, after the fashion had become too obsolete for the better part of the house. The small white marble chimney-piece, representing Cupids turned hop-pickers, had evidently been erected when there was some intention of the room being used as a *boudoir*, or whatever was the equivalent in those days. Over it hung, not inappropriately, a really pretty coloured print of boy and girl gleaners; all steadying their golden burdens on their heads with the one hand, and carrying their blue-ribboned hats in the other.

This was Catherine's privileged retreat; the only one of the household admitted

to share her solitude being a tiny Blenheim spaniel, which usually lay on her knees while she was playing, as at most other times.

From the various masters whom her brother engaged to attend her, she in general learned well, but languidly, whatever they chose to teach her. In music alone she showed any special pleasure; and in this her powers rather perplexed than delighted her instructors. Reading even difficult compositions at sight, she was satisfied with the enjoyment of thus rapidly taking in the composer's ideas; and never cared to undergo the labour of acquiring a finished and telling execution, or even of learning perfectly any but the most exquisite bits; and when left to herself, seldom played from written music at all; extemporizing for hours, without effort, during the long mornings which she spent alone in this secluded corner of the house. Frank would not have her whims interfered with; and as her routine lessons were always

regularly prepared, she was allowed to spend the rest of her time as she liked.

Mabel glanced round instantly at the prints, then stood lingeringly by the piano, her hand resting on the top.

“Will you not play to me?” she asked.

Catherine coloured a little, and looked at her sideways, with an expression which said, “I do not know you well enough yet.”

“Not to-day ; some time or other, perhaps. Come down and look at the garden.”

She led the way, through the drawing-room, into the square vestibule ; then down the broad staircase to the entrance corridor. As they were passing out, Mabel looked rather inquiringly at another staircase, very dark and twisted, at the farther end of the corridor.

“That leads up to Frank’s rooms,” said Catherine, replying to her look—“his bedroom and study. They are in the old part of the house, you see ; and there are rooms for

visitors, too, just as they used to be ; but we never have any visitors now," she added, with a half sigh. " *Our* rooms are all in the wing ; but there is a door leading from our landing to Frank's rooms, and to the others, too, if they were wanted. But they are all shut up ; only Mrs. Elliott is very particular about having them kept in order."

"Who is Frank?" inquired Mabel. Both Mrs. Stretton and Mrs. Elliott had spoken only of "Mr. Calder."

"He is my brother ; he is a great deal older than I. He takes care of me. He is very kind. But now come into the garden."

But just as she was about to approach the hall door, which the powdered butler, emerging in a magical manner from some sacred retirement, was preparing, with awful politeness, to throw open for the young ladies, Mrs. Elliott's voice was heard on the stairs just behind them.

"My dear Catherine ! what are you think-

ing of? You will catch your death of cold! What would your brother say if he thought I suffered you to go out with nothing on, this bitter cold weather?"

"I beg your pardon; I quite forgot," said Catherine, penitently. "I wanted to show Mabel the garden."

"Hannah shall bring your things in a moment. Miss Arleigh, I am sure, will excuse—
—Pray walk in here, and sit down a moment," she added, addressing herself to Mabel, and opening, as she spoke, the door of the dining-room; a large, gloomy, wainscoted apartment, with a few (very bad) family portraits on the walls. Mrs. Elliott then hurried off, to give directions to Hannah.

Catherine looked rather ashamed and annoyed.

"Frank is so kind—he is always so afraid about me; though I do not think there is any need—"

"I am sure," said Mabel, "it is too cold to

go out without being well wrapped up; it is a very good thing Mrs. Elliott thought of it. Look at me!" and she shook out merrily her little cloak of coarse grey cloth. "We have been driving in the pony-chaise; and it was so cold, even with this!"

Hannah here came in, laden with dainty wrappings; very different from little Mabel's matter-of-fact equipment. Carefully, as one accustomed to the office, she folded round her young mistress the velvet mantle; encircled her slender throat with the delicate swans-down, which scarcely exceeded its whiteness; even insisted on Catherine's sitting down, and submitting to have fur boots drawn on the daintily-shod feet.

The business was at last accomplished; and Catherine, in evident relief, with a confiding—"Come, Mabel!" again led the way to the garden; which they were this time permitted to enter without interruption.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE grounds, like the house, were well kept up, but dreary looking. Behind the house was a kind of wilderness of yew and laurel. A belt of firs, forming a grove, masked the high wall which separated the grounds from the village road. All else was level lawn, tufted here and there with shrubs; and meadows sloping, with a scarcely perceptible descent, to a small brook, a tributary of the larger river which shimmered in the distance.

“But where do you have your flowers?” asked Mabel, looking round. It was winter;

but she was trying to imagine how the place would look in spring.

“There is a great border, under the south wall of the kitchen-garden. Roberts always gathers all the flowers we want from there.”

“All you want?” said Mabel, puzzled.

“I mean, he fills the great bowl on the hall-table, and the vases in the drawing-room; and we always have some in our sitting-room upstairs (you have not seen that). And did you notice that beautiful little vase on *my* chimney-piece? It is some rare china; Frank gave it me on my birth-day, two years ago. Roberts always brings me violets for it in spring, and rosebuds in summer.”

“But why don’t you have some pretty beds here on the lawn, where you could gather them any minute? and some flowers looking in at the windows, so that you could put out your hand and pick? Let me just draw you the shape of some beds you might have on the grass.”

Mabel picked up a loose twig, and began earnestly tracing indented lines on the turf, sticking in little sprays here and there, to mark the points. But she did not succeed very well ; she had seen Clara indicate her notions in some such way to the gardeners, but had not tried it herself, and found more difficulty than she expected. She was half kneeling, working painfully at her plan, when Frank came up, returning from one of his rounds of inspection.

“ My brother,” said Catherine.

Mabel sprang up, looking rather ashamed. Her long curls had fallen forward over her face, and she could scarcely clear them from before her eyes.

Frank at first half raised his hat, and then, as he saw the childish appearance of the visitor, held out his hand to shake hers.

He was tall, as Catherine bade fair to be ; and, in the mere features, he strikingly resembled his sister. But he was rather dark,

while Catherine was very fair ; and, instead of her vague, dreamy expression, he had a peculiarly resolute, somewhat business-like look. "He looks more busy than Edward," thought Mabel, "though Edward has always so much to do."

"This is Mabel, Frank," said his sister.

He looked enquiringly.

"From the Chace," said Catherine.

"Oh ! I understand !" and, involuntarily, as it were, he took the little hand again in his. "You seem very busy?"

"I wanted Catherine to have some flower-beds here. She says she has no flowers except in the kitchen-garden."

"Catherine, if you wished for flower-beds, why did you not tell Roberts to make you some?"

"I never thought of it," said Catherine.

"Well, I will give orders about them tomorrow. And now, good-bye. I am going to — (the nearest town), and shall not be

back to-night. I hope your visitor will stay as long as she can."

He kissed his sister on the cheek, raised his hat this time in good earnest to Mabel, and was outside the gates in a moment.

"Come, now," said Catherine, "let us walk round. I will show you the old flower-border, and then we must go down to the brook."

They walked along the fir-grove, and came to a heavy wooden door in an old, high, red-brick wall. Catherine opened it, and led Mabel into the large, orderly kitchen-garden. It looked dull, as any place would have looked on that wintry day; but was doubtless the most cheerful part of the grounds, when the peach and apricot trees put forth their bloom, and the old fig-trees their leaves—when the banks round the brick tank were white with strawberry blossoms, or the broad border under the south wall was a-blaze with roses and wall-flowers, stocks, pinks, and carnations, white lilies and Turk's caps, columbine, scarlet

lychnis, and all such gay, *decided* old-fashioned flowers.

A lame, old man hobbled up to them at once, touched his cap, and said, with a familiarity which was not disrespect—

“Glad to see you with a young companion, Miss; ’twill make it less lonesome for you, like.”

“Thank you, Roberts,” said Catherine, almost shyly, and drew Mabel on.

Before they had left the enclosed garden, however, he was again beside them.

“Do you like riddles, Miss?” he said to Mabel.

His address was abrupt, but he looked searchingly into her face, to see if she were likely to take offence.

“Yes,” said Mabel.

“Can you tell me what moral lesson that ’ere weathercock teaches?” and he pointed to one which glittered at some distance, where the spire of Ringwood church rose above a clump of yews.

“Something about ‘vain;’—one may be sure of that,” said Mabel, laughing; “all moral lessons have that word in them.”

“It is *vain* to *aspire*!” muttered the old man, rather solemnly, as if to himself.

“Ah!” exclaimed Mabel, “that is not bad—the riddle I mean. The moral is very disagreeable, but then most morals are; don’t you think so, Catherine?”

“Oh, Miss!” the old man went on, pertinaciously following them, “you should have seen this place in its old days, when the rooms were full of company, and the stable-yard all alive with grooms and helpers! Such whistling, and singing, and clattering of hoofs on the pavement in the morning, when they was a rubbing down their horses! Those *was* times! when the Squire had his hunting-stud, and old Madam, his mother—Miss’s grand-mamma—(here he indicated Catherine)—used to drive to Ringwood in her great coach, with four black horses; coachman, in his curled

wig, on the box, and two powdered footmen on the footboard, with gold-headed canes. And a grand nosegay out of the garden gathered for coachman, whenever they was going to the houses of quality round. I should like to see you drive out so, Miss ;” (to Catherine). “ You’d well become it ; and master is richer than any of his folks have ever been in my time.”

“ It would be very dull,” said Catherine, languidly. Mabel had been listening open-eyed to this description of past grandeur ; but directly Catherine’s image was associated with the old-world pomp, she laughed outright.

“ A ride on horseback is better ; is it not, Catherine ?”

“ I have never ridden,” said Catherine.

“ Never ridden !” exclaimed Mabel, looking half-incredulous. “ Oh ! do ask your brother to buy you a horse directly, and then we can ride together every day.”

Catherine hesitated.

“Should you not like it?” asked Mabel, puzzled.

“Oh! yes!”—Catherine spoke with deep-drawn breath, as if just catching a glimpse of some delight too great for hope.

“Yes, I am sure you would,” said Mabel. “I used to ride the boys’ pony every holidays; and now and then I have ridden Clara’s horse. Oh! that was like floating on a wave of the sea, and feeling it bound under you! But it is best to have a pony now, and be able to ride about without anybody to take care of one. You’ll ask your brother directly, won’t you?”

Catherine again hesitated.

“Are you afraid of him?” asked Mabel. “He looks good-natured.”

“Oh no! not afraid,” said Catherine. “Only I don’t like—”

“What a pity!” said Mabel. “Clara and Edward used to be angry with me, if I didn’t ask for anything I wished.”

“And did they always give it to you?” said Catherine.

“Oh no! not always,” said Mabel. “But Clara used to say,—‘You silly little thing, how can we tell what you wish unless you ask? If it’s anything we can’t give you, why, you can but do without it, as the boys are so often obliged to.’”

“But I want to know who this Edward and Clara are,” said Catherine, gently.

“Oh! do you not know? I thought my aunt must have told you. They took me when I was a little forlorn thing, when poor papa and mamma died; when we had no one to take care of us, but grandpapa and grand-mamma; and *they* were not rich, and quite old, and did not know what to do with us. Oh! it was very kind! I love them all so much!” And the clear voice choked, and the large grey eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

“And you were very happy with them?”

asked Catherine, with a look and manner of intense interest.

“ Oh, so happy ! It was so pleasant there ; Mr. Stretton, and Clara, and Edward, and the boys ! If I could only have had Arthur there ! ”

“ Is that your brother ? ” asked Catherine.

“ Yes ! he is a little boy, and it was so dull for him with poor grandpapa and grandmamma ; and I used to be always wishing for him ! But I have him here, which is much better ; and we *belong* here, you know ; ” and the child drew back her head with the air of a princess. “ So it is quite right for us to come ; but it was always so merry there ! ” And she half sighed.

“ Will you come very often, and be with me ? ” said Catherine, timidly. “ I am almost always alone ; it is very dull ; should you mind coming ? ” she asked, in a pleading tone.

“ Oh, thank you ! that will be so nice !

Perhaps—" But here old Roberts again overtook them.

" Ah ! Miss Catherine, what has you been a doing ? It's a new thing to see you busy in the garden."

" Mabel—Miss Arleigh—was showing me how to make some beds for flowers on the lawn."

" Doesn't know much about it her own self," muttered the old man, quite loud enough to be intelligible. " Howsomdever, Miss Catherine, I am glad to see you *taking* to something, instead of moping about, and caring nothing about nothing ; so I'll see what I can do, and talk to the master, and get him to trim up the old place ; not but he's partic'ler enough in his way ; but things wants a fresh start. Only this blessed morning I was at him, to let me order in a fresh lot of currant bushes ; here be these great old woody fellows, a dwindlin' an' a witherin', going the way of all flesh, like the rest of us."

“My brother often tells me,” said Catherine, “that you are to have anything you want for the garden.”

“Oh, in *coorse* ; he’ll not stint nor spare, that everybody knows well enough, where the honour of the family is *consarned* ; but what does a gentleman like he, and book-*larned*, too, know about a garden?—And a young lady like you, Miss Catherine, to take no pleasure in the old place !”

Mabel laughed, and Catherine gently drew her away.

“Roberts is fault-finder general,” she said, in an under-tone ; “but he is privileged ; he may say what he pleases.”

Catherine walked home with Mabel that evening, across the park ; and from that time, most of their leisure was spent together.

CHAPTER XVIII.

For some weeks nothing more was said about Catherine's riding ; but the rapid *run* of Mabel's pony was now a frequent sound on the gravelled sweep before Calder House. She generally came over directly after breakfast, before morning lessons, just to exchange greetings with Catherine ; the latter often walking over to the Chace later in the day, to spend the afternoon with her friend.

One morning, as Mabel came up, on her pony, she found Frank and Catherine standing together at the door ; he was just going

out. When he saw Mabel, he came forward to help her off her pony, as he had several times done, when he had happened to be in the way. Mabel, who was accustomed to spring off without assistance, had always accepted his help, with a quiet "Thank you, Sir," and passed on into the house, to seek Catherine. This time, however, having disengaged herself from the pommel, she faced round on the saddle, and sat still a minute, then said, looking full at him—

"I should so like Catherine to ride with me!"

"Would *you* like it?" asked Frank, turning round to his sister.

Catherine's eyes looked very unusually eager, but she only said, "If you please."

"Shall I look out a horse for you? Would you like to take riding-lessons?" He spoke with almost the deferential earnestness of a steward taking his orders.

"Oh please," broke in Mabel, "may not she

have a pony first, just to begin with, and ride with me about the park? and then, if she should fall off, on the soft turf, it won't matter."

Frank's gravity suddenly relaxed; he fairly laughed.

"A very 'good suggestion, Miss Arleigh," he said. "We will see about the pony directly."

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Mabel, incautiously. "Catherine has been wishing for it so much!"

"Have you?" he asked quickly, turning round again to Catherine. "Then why did you not ask me?" He looked from Catherine to Mabel; both the girls were confused. Something in their expression seemed to strike him. "You were not *afraid*?" he asked, almost sternly, of Catherine.

"Oh no!" said Mabel, eagerly, "she told me she was not."

"Catherine!" said her brother, in a sup-

pressed tone, "will you never believe that I *can* have no wish in this world but to give you pleasure? I will see about the pony at once," he added, quickly resuming his usual manner,—bowed to Mabel, and left them.

Catherine stood motionless, her head drooping like a flower of which the stalk has been suddenly broken.

"I am very sorry," said Mabel, penitently.

"It is all my fault," said Catherine. "Now, Mab, dear, let us have some music." And she led the way to her "own room."

Mabel had forgotten all about her "morning lessons;" but Fräulein C.'s rule was so indulgent, that even had she remembered, she would have had little hesitation in remaining, when she had the unanswerable reason to give that she had stayed "to hear Catherine play."

She combined an extreme delight in music with an entire absence of special musical talent;

and thus had about as little power of giving *herself* pleasure in that way as was possible for one who had been always well taught, was not generally stupid, and delighted in the playing of others. To listen to Catherine's improvisations, was one of her greatest pleasures ; but it was one which she seldom enjoyed. Catherine was unaccustomed to play much before any one except her masters, with whom she felt her lessons mere routine work. Actual bashfulness was as impossible as conceit, in connection with a power which seemed almost as natural to her as speaking. But her extempore music was so entirely the out-pouring of her inner self, that she felt it almost impossible to give herself up to it when Mabel's eager eyes were fixed upon her, drinking in every tone, anticipating, as it were, every note ; and she was only gradually becoming accustomed to her presence beside the piano. This morning, however, she played longer, and with more passionate abandon-

ment, than usual ; yet even this could not wholly dispel the troubled look from Mabel's face ; or chase from her mind a vague feeling of having done amiss.

In less than a week, however, there appeared at Calder House,—no pony, but such a beautiful little grey palfrey : a delicate Arab, whose pace was a rocking amble, the most luxurious exercise in the world ; and there were such long consultations with Mrs. Elliott on Catherine's equipment ; and Catherine looked so graceful and pleased amid her timidity, when fairly mounted ; and Frank so triumphantly happy, as he walked by her side, that Mabel no longer repented her audacious interference.

Catherine's first ride was, indeed, an event for the whole household. The old gardener hobbled up to look on, and the fat elderly cook emerged from her back door for a side view. The butler lounged on the front threshold with an air of easy affability, and calm con-

sciousness of being in his place ; while, just within, vibrated the pink ribbons of spruce housemaids, with whom he occasionally condescended to exchange a remark. Mrs. Elliott stood at a window of the dining-room, commanding the lawn and paddock ; admiring the becoming effect of the plumed cap on Catherine's graceful head, and grieving to think how the sky-blue habit would be stained and torn in the wild scrambling rides which Mabel was planning for her friend. To do Mrs. Elliott justice, all due representations had been made to Frank by herself, and even by Catherine, at her suggestion, on the unsuitableness of the riding-equipment which he had insisted on providing for his sister. But his only reply had been, "What does that matter ? When this habit is spoiled, she can have another. I choose her to have what is fit for her."

"Well, to be sure ! did you ever see anything so charming as Miss Catherine looks, now ?" exclaimed one of the pink-ribboned

housemaids, as Catherine, gaining courage, passed near them at a somewhat quicker pace, and with an unusual glow in her cheeks.

“Miss Calder always looks well,” replied the butler, with dignified reserve. *He* waited every day behind her seat at table, and was not to be dazzled by her beauty as by anything new or unfamiliar. And besides, all whom *he* condescended to serve *were* superior people; and he was incapable of indiscreet remarks on the subject.

“And, indeed, if Miss Catherine were mistress of the place, in her own right, her brother could not be fonder nor prouder over her, nor keep her grander than he does!” was the comment of the elderly cook.

“And yet he may come nigh to breaking her heart some day, pretty creature, with these strange ways of his. I’m glad she has got a young thing like herself to speak to now and then, anyhow,” said the old gardener, who had hobbled up to join the spectators.

A new question, however, now arose. Mabel's leading notion of enjoyment was that they should ride by themselves, unattended and unescorted. Indeed, as the two establishments at present stood, there seemed no one to ride with them in either capacity. Neither old Thomas, nor the stately Calder House butler, would have felt sufficiently secure of his own position on horseback, to prove very efficient as an escort. A country lad, rough and uncouth, took care of the ponies which constituted the Ringwood stud. He understood the ponies, and the ponies understood him; and on one point especially, the two contracting parties had come to a tacit, but friendly, understanding. They allowed him to do anything with them but *ride* them. They would even submit, with many an impatient toss of mane and tail, to be *caught* by him; but let him try to *mount* one of them, and each had its own especial device for infallibly unseating him. There was thus little

chance for poor Charlie of such progress in horsemanship as could qualify him to act as squire of "damozelles."

Frank had never, since his father's death, kept a horse for his own use ; and the notion of himself accompanying the two girls in their rides did not seem to occur to him as a possibility. Indeed, he was little at home ; and when there, was usually fully engaged. During Catherine's two or three experimental rides, first on the lawn, then about the fields, he kept close beside her, watching, directing, and encouraging. Then he became anxious to procure for her a riding-master from the nearest town ;—that she should practise thoroughly under his guidance, before attempting to ride with Mabel only. But the notion of the riding-master Mabel hated, and Catherine shrank from ; and Frank at length yielded ; with a sort of mistrust, however, half-serious, half-amused. Mrs. Stretton stipulated only, as she had done from the first

with Mabel, that they should confine themselves to the immediate precincts of the Chace, and the small portion of the village which lay between their two homes.

There was little temptation to transgress. The breezy uplands, forest-roads, and intricate bridle-paths of the Chace, were enough to satisfy all their present longings. And it was wonderful how little in the shape of difficulty or disaster they encountered. Mabel had previously attained to a tolerably absolute sway over her own shaggy Puck ; and only *enjoyed* his occasional restive outbreaks, or wily manœuvres to obtain the upper hand. Catherine was timid, and would probably always remain so ; she had not begun riding early enough to overcome her natural tendencies. But she soon learned to love and confide in her pretty Zorah, that gentlest of milk-white palfreys. The docile creature quickly acknowledged her as mistress ; knew her voice, her hand, even the slightest intimation of her will ; followed

her wistfully to paddock-gate or stable-door ; for Catherine began to pay domiciliary visits even to the stables, in her anxiety for her favourite's comfort. Zorah seemed her *very own* ; almost the first thing, except her piano, with regard to which she had experienced the pleasures of possession.

The exhilarating exercise, and still more, new interest and unaccustomed companionship, told gradually upon one who had been drooping and colourless, from very want of sunshine. A tinge stole almost imperceptibly into her cheeks ; something of decision and elasticity into her manner. When on horse-back, her listlessness and languor sometimes vanished entirely. She made Mabel often tell her of the wild Welsh hills, among which she had first begun in her early childhood to ride ; but oftener, of her merry frolics with "the boys ;" of Edward, and Clara, and kind Mr. Stretton. She enquired minutely into their ways, their household sayings and doings.

The subject seemed to her one of inexhaustible interest. She laughed and talked as at no other times; appearing literally to bask in the warm glow of that joyous family life. It was what she had never known, except for that brief period after her father's return; a period only long enough to leave an unconscious want and craving behind.

"How unhappy you must be to be separated from them all!" she one day exclaimed. The girls were sitting on the dry, warm turf, below a great tree, to which they had tied their ponies; and in the idleness of that spring noontide, Catherine had beguiled Mabel into the favourite topic.

Mabel looked rather startled, and half ashamed.

"I suppose I ought to be," she said, after a minute's pause.

"*Ought?*" said Catherine, rather puzzled.

"Why, of course I am always thinking of them; I was so happy with them, and long so

much to have them with me. And yet,—I am so happy here ; and I have Arthur ; and I shall have them all, some day, I hope. And it is so difficult to be unhappy.”

“ *Difficult ?*” said Catherine, lifting up her long sweeping lashes in wonder.

“ Well, most things are so pleasant ; one may be *sorry* about something ; but it *is* difficult to be really unhappy,—unless there is anything quite terrible,” she added, after a moment’s thought. “ Oh, then it is dreadful ! Don’t talk to me of it ; it frightens me ;” and she put her hands for one minute over her face, as if to shut out some fearful image.

Catherine looked dismayed. And, indeed, while the undercurrent of mournfulness in her nature was the very opposite of Mabel’s overflowing joyousness, she could perhaps hardly feel, certainly not imagine, the passionate vehemence of grief, of which, under extraordinary circumstances, the latter’s nature

was capable. In that one minute, all past and all possible sorrows crowded suddenly, with the vividness of reality, on Mabel's imagination ; but in one minute she had sprung up.

“Don't frighten me !” she said again. “Come, shall we have a race ? You can sit quite safely now.” And presently, her long curls streaming behind, her eyes lighted up with eagerness, she was urging her nimble Shetlander, in competition with the fleet-footed Arab, up the breezy slope at the foot of which they had been sitting.

CHAPTER XIX.

THIS new companionship in riding, with the little incidents and adventures to which it gave rise, formed the chief external interest of Mabel's life for some months. All else went on with little variety. Regular daily lesson-hours were required from her, though not over-rigidly enforced; the rest of her time was left pretty much at her own disposal. She was becoming quite at home at the Chace, and exceedingly happy in her own way. Her aunt was kind, though not sociable; Fräulein C. and Mabel were very

good friends, but there seemed no particular congeniality between them ; so that, beyond lesson hours and an occasional somewhat formal walk, they were little together. Even Fräulein C.'s music seemed to Mabel far less charming than Catherine's, perhaps through a half perverse feeling that from the *governess* she was expected to *learn* music.

For books she had the insatiable appetite of her age ; and there was no scarcity of books at Ringwood Chace ; *old* books, that is to say ; for in that department, as in all others, recent additions had been on a scale wholly disproportioned to the profusion of by-gone days. A certain tincture and patronage of literature had been one of the stately old traditions of the house ; and the library, which had been fortunately reclaimed almost intact, contained many choice presentation copies, from authors whose names have long since eclipsed those of the patrons to whom they reverently and gratefully offered these first-

fruits of their genius. Some of the Strettons had been themselves hard and successful students ; the true Strettons did *in earnest* whatever they undertook. Mrs. Stretton's own life had been one struggle with stern practical realities ; but to Mabel, as to so many, books were a more real and exciting world than that around her. Some few compartments of the library were locked ;—it was no new precaution adopted on her account ; the old Squire, careless in all else, had never forgotten that his girls were motherless. On this restriction Mabel never commented ; perhaps, with instinctive tact, she understood and accommodated herself to the limitation. At any rate, her range through the other book-shelves was wide enough, and was rarely interfered with ; so she gathered unchecked, like a bee, whatever was most to her taste. Poetry, of course, and romance, first of all, and to any extent ; only she really did not often like what was not tolerably good of its kind. Then history and

travels, so far as she could make *pictures* of them in her mind ; upon this her interest in books seemed chiefly to hinge. It appeared as if in *her* dwelt the artist faculty, as far as conception went, wholly dissevered from the power of execution ; as if those wondrous eyes of hers were always *seeing* what the hand had no skill to reproduce ; as if *to her*, no less than to her father and brother, the impressions of the world without, and the acquisitions of the brain within, spontaneously resolved themselves into *pictures*.

Arthur, too, enjoyed his “Shakespeare’s Plays,” and his “Arabian Nights,” unmolested ; but his aunt was beginning to look more closely after his school doings ; and even to himself the subject had assumed a more serious importance ; for the edict had gone forth from her whose will was law ;—he *must* work hard, to be on a level with others of his age, when he should be sent, as he must soon be, to a regular “boys’ school.”

“Do you think, Arthur,” his aunt had once said, “that I can have *my* boy at the bottom of the school? Work hard, and be at the head, wherever you go, for the honour of Ringwood.”

And the boy worked, under the stimulus of these words and that look. No hope of prizes, no dread of punishment, could thus have stimulated that dreamy artist nature.

Few and far between came letters from Clara; always affectionate and always brief; for letter-writing was Clara's aversion. Only one thoroughly initiated like Mabel could have realized vividly, as she did, the whole moving, stirring, yet uneventful family life, from such disjointed fragments of passing gossip as Clara's letters afforded.

Of the home of her early childhood Mabel scarcely ever spoke. Memories of dimly-understood sorrows and anxieties blended ever with the voice of that rushing stream, with the shadows of those purple mountains. The

light of childhood had been half shut out, as those giant mountain walls curtailed the fair summer horizon ; the glee of her happy nature had been solitary, overshadowed, broken, as the course of the torrent down its rocky glen. One morning, however, when the air was filled with soft spring rain, pattering dreamily upon the fresh leaves with a hushing sound, something seemed to impel her into the subject ; and the curtained recess of her own favourite window, with the vague distance of its mist-veiled landscape, harmonized well with the unwonted tone of thought, as she told Catherine of the gentle mother who had smiled on through all.

“She always told us,” she went on, “that she was not clever ; I suppose she was not, as my aunt is ; but she had learnt everything that could be taught, and used to try to recollect her old lessons, that she might teach us, that we might not be quite different from what she and her brothers and sisters had

been. But she had very little time, and could not do half what she wished. And at night, when she came to bed and thought me asleep (I slept in a little bed in her room), and papa was sitting up, hard at work, I used to hear her praying, 'Only good,—only make them good, and I am content.' And often she would fall asleep between, she was so tired. Oh, Catherine! when my head is so full of all sorts of things at night, I can hardly say my prayers, I think of poor mamma."

CHAPTER XX.

THE Midsummer holidays arrived. Fräulein C. was away visiting her friends in Germany ; Arthur was enjoying himself in thorough idleness at home, before going to a large school at some distance. He had made fair general progress, and was on the whole rather more steady and diligent than most boys of his age ; but his heart was in his drawing, to which he reverted at every unoccupied moment, as if relapsing from a constrained into a natural attitude. Mrs. Stretton looked on awhile dubiously, half disapprovingly ; but by degrees

the drawing, like all Arthur's doings, became right and delightful in her eyes.

It was intensely hot weather ; too hot for riding, except in the evening, when Arthur, who had also his rough pony, generally accompanied the two girls, as he was accustomed to do on half-holidays. Mabel usually managed to secure a breezy walk before breakfast ; unless too strongly fascinated by some book to the cushioned seat of her oriel window ; where she could still breathe in the sea-freshness, or watch at intervals the gradual wakening up of the landscape from its misty trance. But when breakfast was over, after one hasty visit to her flowers, before the noon-tide sun should make it impossible, she often sauntered, holiday-time though it was, into the deserted school-room ; partly from habit, partly because many of her belongings were naturally kept there ; partly, also, because it was really one of the coolest rooms in the house. And thither, without a word, Arthur

generally followed her ; thither he transported imperceptibly most of his "*litter*," as the servants called the shabby portfolios, loose scraps of paper, pencil-ends, and fragmentary cakes of paint, by which "the young master" was to be tracked throughout the house. His fancy for settling himself quietly in the school-room was a great relief to all the household ; certainly not least to Mrs. Stretton. She had vainly tried to persuade him into orderly habits, by the offer of any one of the numerous unappropriated rooms for his sole use. But Arthur did not like such dignified isolation ; and roamed from floor to floor, never subsiding till he had found Mabel, his aunt, Catherine, or even Mrs. Jones, to talk to him while drawing.

Most twisted of the many twisted little passages *débouching* from the hall was that which led therefrom to the "school-room ;" as, in good, old-fashioned phrase, the room appropriated to Mabel's daily lessons was

styled. A highly suitable, unexceptionably dull apartment it was : the ground-floor of one of the turrets which projected from the northern front ; the one nearest to the western angle, and farthest from that in which Mrs. Stretton's dressing-room was situated ; remote, indeed, from all the principal thoroughfares and frequented rooms of the house ; the " uninhabited island," Arthur often called it. The windows were small and high ; two out of the four had been built up ; and the room was yet farther darkened by tapestry, representing, in exaggerated effects of light and shade, the most tragical incidents of Old Testament history, from the murder of Abel and the slaying of Sisera downwards ; the actors in all these varied scenes being represented of almost colossal proportions, while their complexions had assumed an unnatural paleness, and their drapery a grim sombreness, from the lapse of years. Dismal as the room was, however, Arthur had taken a singular fancy to it ; and

frequently declared, that when Mabel had done with lessons, he would have it for his painting-room ; though Mabel, with a half comic, half serious, assumption of connoisseurship, assured him that it would never do, on account of the cross lights ; and would be a great deal too dark, if one of the two remaining windows were blocked up. Mabel yet retained some notions, picked up from her father, whose constant companion and perpetual interruption she had been. Arthur, however, had not yet arrived at the perception of such niceties ; no light seemed amiss for his enthusiastic, boyish drawing, which went on vigorously in all.

One morning Catherine, as frequently happened, had joined the party ; having walked over early, before the greatest heat of the day came on. She was especially fond of Arthur, humouring his boyish fancies, and treating him as an equal, far more than Mabel, who took on herself somewhat of the airs of an elder sister towards him.

Catherine had settled herself on a low seat in one corner ; holding in her hand a book, in which she was at intervals rather listlessly reading. Her little dog was, as usual, on her lap ; the attitude one of slumber ; the little head pressed down on her knee ; the large, silken ears sweeping down on each side of the tiny, speckled nose ; but the bright, wistful eyes keeping an unrelaxing watch on all that went on in the room.

Mabel was leaning over Arthur at the table ; making him, as she called it, draw to her dictation :—" Draw this ;" now, " Draw that ;" —suggesting, in rapid succession, historical or domestic scenes, allegorical subjects, &c. He had the faculty of giving, by a few rapid strokes, an unmistakable notion of whatever he wished to represent, however inaccurate might be the drawing by which it was conveyed.

" How tiresome it is to have no genius !" exclaimed Mabel suddenly, with a deep sigh.

Arthur and Catherine both looked up, quite startled.

“What *do* you mean?” Arthur enquired.

“Why, you know, I cannot draw as you do, or play as Catherine does, anything that comes into your heads, without any trouble.”

Arthur looked puzzled.

“You can learn lessons without any trouble,” he said at length; “I am sure they are trouble enough to *me*.”

“Oh, that is only learning something of other people’s; not doing anything oneself. And it *is* tiresome, because I really *have* things in my head.”

“Of course you have,” said Catherine, laughing. “I am sure you always put things into mine, that never would have come there without you. I feel quite different when you have been with me.”

“If I could only paint them, or do anything with them!” said Mabel. “Oh, Arthur! one night I dreamed of something so bright,

floating just above me; too buoyant to be kept down on the earth. And the light flashing from every point, making the shape all indistinct. And then it seemed to make a great effort to keep *in* the light, and stood close by me, and took hold of my hand; yet the light kept flashing out every now and then, and the whole shape enlarging again, and growing buoyant, as if it could hardly be kept down. And it said something to me.”—

“*What?*” asked Arthur, under his breath.

“I don’t know now,” said Mabel. “Now and then I think I remember, but not often.”

There was an unusual silence. “You are well named, Mab,” said Catherine, at length; “you are a very queen of dreams.”

“No, indeed, Catherine, I very seldom dream at all; at least not anything worth remembering.”

“Well,” said Arthur, no “one could easily paint anything like *that*, all moving and

changing.—“To be sure,” he went on after a moment’s thought,—“they do paint the sea and sky. But this is something different still. I don’t suppose it’s any use for you to try to paint your *thoughts*, Mab; I see you couldn’t.”

“But that is no reason,” said Catherine, “why you should not learn to draw like other people. You know I learn to copy pictures, and to take views; and it is very pleasant.”

“Yes, to be sure,” said Arthur; “and *you* (to his sister) might as well learn of Fräulein C., who *does* draw very well, in [that copying sort of way.”

“So I will,” said Mabel; “that will be better than nothing. I will ask her as soon as she comes back; and I know she would be glad; for she wanted to teach me before, only I would not let her.—And then,” she added, with the glee of a new idea,—“I may copy some of the old portraits!”

A bold scheme, not very likely to be realized to much purpose; but those old portraits had an indescribable fascination for Mabel.

"Don't you ever try to take likenesses, Arthur?" said Catherine.

"Oh, to be sure," said Arthur, "only people are so tiresome, they won't sit still. When I first went to school, I got likenesses of some of the boys without their knowing; but the fellows soon found out what I was at; and took to making nonsense faces, whenever I looked at one of them; or coming behind and capsizing me, if they saw me busy at anything."

"Well, you have Mabel at home with you; why don't you try her? I should so like to have her portrait."

"Oh, Mabel is worse than any of them; and she never looks the same two minutes together. She is like that dream of hers, only not so beautiful," said Arthur, with a

saucy nod at his sister. "And either she keeps moving, or she gets into a sort of dream; and *that* is not the right thing, you know." And Arthur, as he concluded the summary of his grievances, looked up at Catherine with an injured air.

"I will sit for you, if that will be any use," she said.

"Oh, will you really, Catherine? I did not like to ask you; it is very kind. Let me try." And he changed his position so as to look at her; and began preparing paper and pencils.

"Oh, do, Arthur!" said Mabel; "Catherine is made for a picture, and she always sits so still, just *like* a picture. You will have very little trouble."

Arthur looked fixedly at Catherine for a minute, swaying the pencil which he held in his hand over the white surface of the paper. Suddenly he threw down the pencil.

"You won't mind, Catherine, if I make

your dress different?—something out of my own head, I mean?"

"Oh, not at all," said Catherine, laughing; "dress me as you like."

"Thank you."

And he began to draw.

"Don't look, Mabel!" covering the paper with his hand, as she came to look over him; "you must not see it till it is finished."

In about a quarter of an hour he paused for a moment. "Are you not tired, Catherine?" he enquired.

"Not the least. I will sit as long as you please."

"How good-natured you are, Catherine! I suppose you have good practice, giving up your own way to your brother."

"No, indeed," said Catherine, earnestly. "He gives me my own way in everything. He never by any chance contradicts me."

"Oh, well," said Arthur, carelessly, "I thought he seemed a bit of a tyrant."

“ Arthur, for shame !” said Mabel, colouring scarlet.

“ Why, he is not her own brother, you know ; and he always seems out of patience when she comes near him.”

Catherine had turned away ; she was crying.

“ I am sure I am very sorry,” said Arthur, looking frightened ; “ I didn’t think you and he cared much for each other.”

Catherine turned round, quite recovered.

“ Arthur,” she said quietly, “ you are quite mistaken. Frank is very, very kind to me ; and if he cannot love me, there is the more merit, you know, in his kindness. He is never angry with me unless I try to thank him for anything.”

Arthur, looking very penitent, went on drawing in perfect silence. For a considerable time not another word was spoken.

“ And another very odd dream I remember,” said Mabel abruptly. She had been for some minutes in one of her absent fits.

Both Arthur and Catherine looked up at her in some surprise.

“Yes! I remember it quite well, now!” she went on, her deep grey eyes looking forward into vacancy, as was their wont when she was speaking earnestly of something not present to the bodily sense. “It was at the besieging of a city—a storming-party—a forlorn hope, do they not call it?—and dear papa was the general, and led them on. It was very odd,” and she almost laughed, “for I never could fancy him a soldier really, or fighting in any way; it did not seem like him. But in the dream I felt no surprise; it all appeared quite natural. And the party were beaten back several times, and he tried to rally them, and cheer them on, and called on them to follow him. But at last it would not do; they were all falling back in confusion, and he could not make them hear or understand. And he stood for one minute, looking quite pale, and put his hand to his forehead.

Oh ! I *have* seen him look so !” and she put her own hands before her eyes. “Then suddenly he turned his head, and saw you, Arthur, quite a little boy, close beside him ; and a light came into his eyes, and he snatched you up, and held you high above his head, and shouted—‘Follow him ! To victory ! to victory ! follow him !’ And the soldiers shouted, and rushed after him in a great crowd. I could only see the wild confusion of men struggling forward, and the child lifted high above all ; and others, from the city, trying to beat them back, and the flashing of their swords and spears like lightning ; and then I heard such a tremendous shout, and I knew that the city was taken.”

Arthur had been listening with dilated eyes and parted lips, seeming to drink in every word. But when Mabel ceased, he only said, very quietly—

“Thank you, Mab ; I think I understand *that* better than your other dream.”

And bending down again over his paper, he applied himself with absorbing diligence to his task. Mabel took up a book, while Catherine sat patiently, only now and then fondling her little dog ; nothing but the abstracted look in her blue eyes indicating that her thoughts had wandered from the present scene.

At length, Arthur threw down his pencils, declaring that he was quite tired, and that he was sure Catherine must be so too. He still persisted in not letting either of the girls look at his drawing, putting it hastily away, and saying that they must not see it till it was finished.

CHAPTER XXI.

“LET me walk home with you this evening, Catherine,” said Mabel. “It is so lovely, after the hot day.”

It *was* lovely. But probably some of the languor of the preceding day still hung about the girls; for they hardly exchanged a word by the way.

Just as they were entering Calder House gates, they met a labouring man, who had been employed in some alterations about the place, and who applied to Catherine for directions as to his next day’s work; receiving the

usual answer : " You must ask my brother, when he comes home."

" Why do you not give your own orders, Catherine ? You know your brother always wishes you to do so."

Catherine hesitated.

" I am sure, if I were you, I should so enjoy having everything after my own fancy."

" You never give any orders at the Chace, do you ?"

" Oh ! it is quite different for *me*. My aunt orders all herself. And then, you know—the Chace *is* so beautiful already ! You don't mind my saying so, Catherine ? But this has to be *made* beautiful ; which is pleasanter still, sometimes."

Catherine stood still, looking thoughtful.

" There *is* one thing I should like to do after my own fancy," she said at length.

" Oh ! tell me," said Mabel, her face lighting up.

“Put the old conservatory to rights.”

“Oh! that will be charming!” exclaimed Mabel. “Let us go and look at it directly.”

“I thought it so beautiful,” Catherine went on, “when I first came here from school. But the great orange-trees are all dead, and nearly all the flowers. There has been no one to care for them.”

She led the way, as she spoke, along a winding path, leading through a neglected shrubbery to the brook. On its brink, in the midst of what had once been a small flower-garden, stood the half-ruined edifice. The level afternoon sunbeams gleamed pleasantly on its front, as the two girls stood side by side, within that pretty little sweep of the glassy stream, by which the pet flower-nook was separated from the rest of the grounds. The rustic bridge was dilapidated, if not positively unsafe; in fact, the little corner had

been absolutely forgotten ; and the approach so masked by overgrown shrubs and trees, that Mabel had never even noticed it. In fact, the grounds at Calder House had a forlorn, neglected look, which always made her melancholy ; and neither she nor Catherine often walked there.

But this strange old building fascinated her at once.

The stucco was crumbling from its pilasters ; much of the glass was broken ; the quaint, rococo decorations had a damp and mildewed look. Within, the stages were nearly unoccupied ; the few plants, that had survived neglect and exposure, were overgrown, bare, and woody. A few hardy creepers, however, had flourished in this state of anarchy, and now mantled much of the interior with a closely-woven tapestry, exquisitely beautiful in itself, but almost depriving the luckless geraniums and myrtles

of their last consolation, the cheering sunshine.

“How pretty it might be!” said Mabel, passing on into a little saloon, which terminated the conservatory at one end. The windows of this small apartment opened immediately upon the stream, which ran close under that extremity of the building. In the centre of the room, some mossy stone dolphins and gigantic natural shells showed that a fountain had once scattered its sparkling coolness over the floor ; a fanciful lamp hung above ; and the coved ceiling, now nearly covered by the intruding creepers which had stolen in from the conservatory, had once been gaily painted. A low divan, with tattered chintz covering, ran round the walls.

“It will be charming to have all this in order again!” said Mabel. “But how will you manage?”

“You know that I have always a great deal

of money," said Catherine, looking down shyly, as if rather ashamed of the fact.

"Yes, I know," said Mabel.

"Frank *will* make me have it; and I have really no use for it; I give it to Mrs. Elliott to keep for me, and go to her when the poor people ask me for anything."

"But I meant, would it not be nice to have all done before your brother sees it, so as to surprise him, and let him see you can do something quite by yourself? But then, he is never away long enough."

"He told me," said Catherine, "that when his holiday-time came—the long vacation, as they call it,"—she added, smiling—"he must go from home for some time—on business, though. It is always business; I don't believe he ever goes anywhere now for pleasure to himself, poor fellow! And he used to be so merry!"

Mabel looked quite sad.

“What *can* be the reason?—when he has plenty of money, and you with him at home, and Mrs. Elliott to take care of you when he wants to go anywhere?”

And for a minute or two she stood lost in thought.

“Well, never mind, Catherine,” she said, rousing herself; “I am sure this will please him more than anything else could do. Don’t you see that the only thing he really cares for is that you should be happy, and not seem afraid to do what you like?”

Catherine coloured deeply; then suddenly laid her hand on Mabel’s, and kept it there for a minute, with a slight, but lingering pressure, as if hesitating whether or not to say something which was in her mind; and Mabel, looking up questioningly, was almost startled as she caught the full gaze of the usually downcast eyes. They were not looking at her, however, but forward into vacancy,

and appeared larger and of a darker blue than usual.

“I suppose you do not remember your mamma at all, Catherine?” said Mabel, after a pause, in a somewhat hesitating manner.

“Oh, no! I wish I did. I was such a little thing when I was sent over.”

“I wonder if you are like her?”

“I do not know in the least. There has been no one to tell me about her. Frank never saw her; she was not *his* mother, you know.”

Catherine never mentioned her father; it was contrary to her nature ever to speak of anything respecting which she felt strongly. The general, through a similarity of temperament, had never spoken to her of her mother.

“And you had no one in England?” enquired Mabel, softly.

“I just remember my grandmamma; she

was alive when I first came over, and living here with my uncle."

"Were you very fond of her?"

"I hardly know. She was very kind to me; and every now and then I felt as if I were going to love her very much; then something came up, which made me too much afraid."

"How strange!" said Mabel.

"Not strange with her; she was such a grand old lady; everybody was afraid of her. She always spoke as if she were doing the person an honour; and every one she spoke to seemed to think the same."

"I remember old Roberts telling us about her," said Mabel.

"Yes; and all those grand ways seemed only just fit for her. She was so tall and stately, with such deep dark eyes, always bright; and her skin so fair; and her hair milk-white. I thought of her the other day,

when we were reading in that old poem about milk-white locks. She wore it always turned up over a cushion ; but she had left off powder ; it would have been of no use. She must have been *so* beautiful when she was young ; they say she was, when grandpapa married her, in India."

"Was your grandpapa in India too?" asked Mabel.

"Yes, just a short time ; but his father died young, so he came over to live at his own place. *He* did not live long ; so grandmamma managed everything. My uncle had bad health, and did not like any trouble, even when he was a man ; and *he* died too, long before he was old, not very long after his mother. They none of them live to be old, I think," added Catherine, with a sudden shade of sadness in her face.

"But your grandmamma, was she born in India?" said Mabel, hastily, to change the subject.

“ Yes, I believe so ; and only was in England a short time, for her education ; then went back, and married grandpapa, while she was quite young. She was an orphan, I think ; the daughter of some brother-officer, I believe. She was very clever, and very proud ; and made the place quite different, they say, from what it was before. She had this conservatory built for her ; and I believe,” said Catherine, laughing, “ that everything which has ever been *grand* about the place is her doing. No one else ever seems to have cared about such things here.”

“ *You* like them, don’t you, Catherine ?”

Catherine coloured, and looked down, half-smiling.

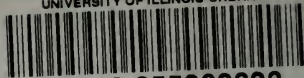
“ I do,” said Mabel ; “ and I am always so glad that the Chace is such a beautiful old place. Though, to be sure, one would love one’s *home*, whatever it might be. Well, good-bye, Catherine ; I must not stay any later ;” and kissing her, she hurried off.

Catherine had been unusually communicative. Constantly as the girls had been together for the last six months, and intimately as she was acquainted with the general history of Mabel's previous life, it was almost the first time that she had entered into particulars respecting her own.

END OF VOL. I.



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